Goddess

THE LANDMARK MEMOIR OF AN EARLY INTERNET ICON

Restored and Reintroduced for a New Era

RAQUEL REYES

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The Landmark Memoir of an Early Internet Icon
Restored and Reintroduced for a New Era

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For scholarly citations and archival information, please refer to Appendix A and Appendix D.

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PRAISE THROUGH THE YEARS

Contemporary Reflections

"Two decades on, Reyes's memoir remains hypnotic and unsettling—a chiaroscuro portrait of an age lost to excess, digital intimacy, and the quiet despair that trails youth long after the night ends. Its raw, near-cinematic realism endures. A foundational text—perhaps the definitive trans manifesto of the early twenty-first century, offering a perspective that reveals rather than explains."

— Jonathan Erickson, author of Becoming the Mirror: Raquel Reyes, Trans Aesthetics, and the Myth of the Self-Made Woman

"Goddess is not just a memoir but a map—charting a journey from object to author, from spectacle to self. Reyes and her story predicted so much of what would follow: the rise of the influencer, the commodification of intimacy, the aesthetics of authenticity. Yet unlike so many who came after, Reyes never mistook the gaze for grace. She used visibility as material, not destination. She remains one of the most unique voices in the trans literary canon."

— Riley Haven, author of Stories from the Dawn of Online Identity

From the Original 2005 Edition

"Raquel Reyes has lived a life most of us will never understand. Her story is, at times, shocking, crude, and tender."

— Susan Thurston, Tampa Bay Times

"Beautifully written and filled with colorful characters, this is the truly remarkable tale of a brave woman who refused to live life on anyone's terms but her own."

— Ellen Tanner Marsh, New York Times Bestselling Author

"A remarkable story. Raquel lived like a rock star and survived to tell the tale. A beautiful woman, unique in her way and very, very special."

— Phil Varone, Drummer, Skid Row

Introduction from the Editor

When the earliest version of *Goddess* first appeared, it was more than a book—it was a rupture. A live wire. A dispatch from a world that few outside it dared to name, much less render with such candor. Its voice was unfiltered, its gaze unflinching. It chronicled beauty and danger in equal measure, revealing a life lived at the edges of gender, glamour, and survival. For many readers—particularly those in queer and trans communities hungry for reflection—it was a revelation. For others, it was a challenge. But to everyone who encountered it, it was unforgettable.

The original text quickly gained a reputation as a cult classic, passed hand to hand, whispered about in corners of academia, nightlife, and art. Its language was raw, its perspective radical: a trans woman speaking not *about* transformation, but *from within it.* It stood at the intersection of performance and authenticity, desire and defiance, and in doing so, carved a permanent place in the evolving canon of trans literature.

In the years since, *Goddess* has lived many lives. It has been studied in university courses, referenced in essays on gender and representation, and cited in conversations about body politics, fame, and the commodification of beauty. Yet its most profound influence has always been personal: it gave voice to those who had been told to remain silent, language to those still forming their own.

But as every artist knows, truth is not static. What was once necessity—a manifesto written in blood and adrenaline—can, with time and distance, become reflection. And reflection, when paired with mastery, can turn confession into craft.

This new edition is not a rewriting. It is an unearthing—a deeper excavation of the same terrain, now rendered with greater precision, empathy, and wisdom. Where the earlier work shouted to be heard, this version *listens.* It honors silence as much as speech, tenderness as much as grit. It remains unapologetic—but it is now also *awake.*

For readers discovering *Goddess* today, know this: you are not simply encountering a personal narrative. You are stepping into a lineage—one that includes the fierce foremothers and foremystics of trans storytelling. Writers who refused to flatten themselves for consumption, who told the truth of their bodies, their hungers, their contradictions. In the tradition of those voices—from Leslie Feinberg to Octavia Saint Laurent, from Sylvia Rivera to the unnamed countless—this work insists that trans lives are not side notes in someone else's mythology. They are the mythologies.

At a moment when trans existence is again politicized, commodified, and contested, the act of speaking clearly—of rendering one's life in language—becomes more than memoir. It becomes resistance. It says: *I was here. I lived. I saw beauty, even in the dark.*

What makes this version remarkable is its scope of feeling. The writing is cinematic, sensual, and unsparing, but also luminous with understanding. There is room now for grief, for forgiveness, for joy that does not need permission. It is not just a record of survival; it is a meditation on what it means to live after survival—to build, to create, to love, to reflect.

As an editor, bearing witness to this evolution has been a privilege. The story remains the same: a young person searching for belonging, love, power, and peace. But the telling—*the telling*—has matured into art.

This is the work of a woman who has lived long enough to see herself not just as protagonist, but as author. Not just as muse, but as maker. And in her making, she gifts us something rare: a mirror in which our own fractures might look a little more like grace.

Goddess, in its refined and resplendent form, now takes its rightful place not only in the lineage of trans literature, but in the broader archive of feminist and queer art—a testament to what happens when the silenced seize the pen, when beauty refuses to apologize, when the body becomes both page and poem. It is a chronicle of womanhood forged in contradiction—a celebration of desire, survival, and the alchemy of becoming.

To those who read this and feel seen—may it remind you that your story, too, is worthy of depth, revision, and return. To those encountering this voice for the first time—may you listen with the reverence it deserves.

And to those who remember the early fire—may you find in these pages not an extinguishing, but a transformation: the flame, at last, turned into light.

-Elizabeth Garner

For Charlie, who lived too fast and died too young.

Foreword

It has been many years since I last allowed the public a glimpse into my world. In that time, I have chosen quiet over chaos, and happiness over the storm that once defined my every moment. These days, my life is unrecognizable from the one chronicled in the pages of Goddess. I live beautifully and peacefully with my husband—far removed from the nightclubs and darker corners where my name once carried a certain charge.

Not long ago, a friend from Savannah reached out to tell me something unexpected: I had found my way into a gender studies curriculum, even forming part of a doctoral thesis on Trans Representation in Media. At first, the thought startled me. But as I read sections of the work, I felt a deep recognition. The world, it seemed, was finally catching up to the gravity I had always hoped my memoir would carry. At its core, Goddess was never a story about transition, not in the clinical sense. It's a story about transformation, and there is a difference. It was about the messy, beautiful, often reckless evolution of a person—myself—struggling, surviving, and at times thriving in a world that wanted to define me more than it wanted to understand me.

For years I wondered if I should return to this memoir, long whispered about as a cult classic in trans literature. Did I have anything more to say? Was there still meaning in revisiting the past, especially now that so many of the unforgettable characters in my life had passed? The answer came quietly but firmly: yes.

The time has come to tell this story again, not as an artifact of one moment, but as a testament to a life fully lived, with all its contradictions and complexities. The memoir in its original form was praised for its crude style and candor but riddled with editorial missteps and errors. I was in the midst of leaving one life behind and starting a new one. At the time, I was hopelessly in love with a rock star, swept up in his orbit, and chasing him from city to city felt far more intoxicating than sitting still with red pens and editorial drafts. Concerts, after-parties, and midnight drives on

his tour bus took precedence over commas and corrections—and so the book went to press with all its raw brilliance intact, flaws and all. I glossed over a lot, especially about my early life, which I should have shared. The struggles and secrets of those years explain far more about me than I realized at the time.

This 20th Anniversary revised and updated edition of Goddess is not an attempt to rewrite history, but to share it anew from a sharper, clear-minded, and more detailed perspective, with a generation ready to hear it in ways the world once was not. The story is the same, yet in this telling it gathers the clarity it long lacked, and in that, becomes whole.

—Raquel Reyes

Preface

I never thought of myself as a drug addict.

I never thought of myself as a prostitute.

At the time, those words belonged to other people—observers, critics, and men who wanted to explain me after the fact. Inside the life itself, the categories dissolved. Money came in waves, faster than I could spend it. And excess wasn't indulgence; it was atmosphere.

As a trans woman moving through spaces never designed for me, I learned quickly that survival often masquerades as power. There were years when I mistook one for the other. From the outside, it looked like conquest—wealth, access, movement, proximity to fame. For a while, I appeared untouchable.

This book is not an attempt to correct that image, nor to apologize for it. It simply is: a life to be understood—or not.

The story that follows does not begin with glamour. It begins earlier—before transition, before money, before the long years of wandering through cities and countries that felt unmoored from time, and nights that seemed to go on forever. The conditions that shaped the woman you will meet here were forged long before she ever learned how to command a room.

Goddess is the record of that becoming.

Emergence

Chapter One

I was born in Tampa, a young boy to a Cuban-Italian family with roots that ran deep through the city's neighborhoods and back alleys. Before the glass towers and new money reshaped its skyline, Tampa in the 1970s was a city of cigar smoke and café con leche, domino tables set up on cracked sidewalks, and the scent of saltwater rolling in with the heat. It was a city of color and tradition, but also humming with secrets—an old port town, a hub for the mafioso and the bolita numbers racket, where men in guayaberas carried pistols under their jackets.

My early years were easy, but I learned fairly quickly that family was a complicated concept, and it came with its own disappointments and fears. My mother was just nineteen when she lost both her parents. Grief swallowed her before she'd had a chance to mature, and she searched for comfort and security in the arms of men who promised escape but carried nothing but trouble. She was beautiful, vulnerable, and aching for something steady—qualities that drew her first to my older sister's father, a drug trafficker, and ultimately to the good-looking rogue who fathered me.

I was a bookish and dreamy little boy, just as happy humming to myself and dancing to salsa as I was inventing stories or sketching pictures in the margins of my notebooks. There was a softness to me, a femininity that set me apart from the boys who scuffed their knees on stickball courts. My laughter came easily, my imagination even easier. I drifted through those early years lighthearted, playful, and oddly untouched by the drama of our circumstances.

My father was movie-star handsome with an aura to match. With piercing eyes and a jawline for days, he carried the quiet cool of Steve McQueen: dangerous, magnetic, impossible to ignore. I see him in fragments now—a leather jacket shrugged over broad shoulders, a cigarette smoldering between his lips, the restless grace of an outlaw living fast and forever on the edge.

But outlaws don't last. Before I was old enough to understand, prison claimed him. One day he was there; the next, he was gone—swallowed whole by a system already notorious for its brutality. The charges read like headlines from a crime spree: multiple counts of grand larceny, armed robbery, conspiracy, and finally an audacious escape—handcuffing an officer to a parked car at gunpoint and driving off in his patrol vehicle. From then on, my father lived only in photographs, in letters, and on Saturday morning visits to the Florida State Prison at Raiford.

As a child, I never knew the sound of his voice speaking to me, or the weight of his hand on my shoulder outside of those prison walls. What I knew was absence, and the strange heaviness it carried. The prison at Raiford became one of the backdrops of my childhood. Our weekends were spent meandering the long, flat stretches of Florida highway, my mother's silence heavy in the car, broken only by the sound of music or the silly little games she used to play with me and my sister to entertain us as we traveled.

I still remember that building, looming gray and lifeless, surrounded by chain-link and razor wire that gleamed in the sun. The sounds of metal gates slamming shut behind us always made my stomach twist. I was too young to understand the rules, but I felt the weight of them—the eyes watching from guard towers, the way my mother's posture stiffened as if she were preparing for battle. Inside, the visiting room was its own strange ecosystem. Hard plastic chairs lined up in neat rows, vending machines humming in the corners, families speaking in hushed voices as though afraid to disturb the fragile balance of the place.

My father would appear in his prison blues, still carrying that same swagger, his smile quick and dazzling, his presence larger than the walls could contain. To me, he was both close enough to touch and impossibly far away—a man suspended between myth and reality. He'd scoop me up, kiss my cheek, and tell me how much he loved and missed me. Despite the tension in the air and the danger that clung to him like the scent of smoke after a fire, I still felt safe in his arms. I watched the way other men deferred to him, the way guards tracked his every move, and I understood: He wasn't just another prisoner. He was someone.

And yet, when the visit ended, the truth was unavoidable. I walked out with my mother while he stayed behind. On the ride home, silence filled the car once more. I tried to remember every detail of our time together, committing his voice and gestures to memory, hoping it would sustain me until the next time I could be with him.

It was in those formative years that what I call *the hunger* began—the need to find him in the faces of other men, to feel that same gravity, that same dangerous beauty, even if it meant always chasing a ghost.

Chapter Two

I never belonged in the schoolyard. The other children moved as if they had been given instructions I'd somehow missed, chasing and shouting in a language that felt foreign to me. I lingered at the edges, clutching my books like armor. But children have a way of sniffing out difference the way dogs smell fear. My voice, my mannerisms, even the way I carried myself—nothing escaped their attention. The teasing was sharp and merciless. I learned quickly that silence was safer than speaking.

After school, I found my escape not in friendships but in stories. The antiquarian bookstore up the street from our apartment became my refuge, its shelves a cathedral where I could slip out of my skin and into other worlds. I read East of Eden by Steinbeck—its grand narrative impossible to fully grasp at that age, yet still transformative.

In a dim corner of the shop, I discovered a stack of vintage movie magazines and marveled at the beauty of Marilyn Monroe, Ava Gardner, and Jayne Mansfield. I devoured pieces on Andy Warhol, Edie Sedgwick, Candy Darling, and the underground film movement of the 1960s. My appetite for culture and knowledge was voracious. Books unveiled unforgettable characters and promised that reinvention was possible, that somewhere beyond my small self, difference could be transformed into power.

But even the fantasies I conjured up couldn't shield me from the realities waiting at home. By then, visiting my father in prison was already fading into memory. His sentences stretched longer, his letters fewer, and his absence grew heavier with each passing year. The glamour he once carried—the outlaw swagger, the whispered respect he commanded even behind bars—was collapsing under the weight of his convictions. His choices shadowed us, staining my mother's name as much as his own.

And yet, my mother kept the house alive. Dinner was always on the table: rice, beans, meat stretched thin but flavored with her determination. Somehow, she kept us afloat on wages too small, her will too stubborn to give up. There was no family to lean on, no man to steady the household,

only her against the weight of bills, loss, and the unrelenting grind of being a single mother in the 1970s. A glass of wine grew into two, then three. She never hid it; she poured it openly, as if daring anyone to judge her for needing relief. She was fierce, a woman who could face down landlords and stretch a dollar past its breaking point, but she was also tired. After the plates were cleared and the radio went quiet, I sometimes caught her staring into the distance, her resolve slipping just enough for me to glimpse the exhaustion underneath.

With my father gone and family retreating, she began searching for other ways to exist. Sometimes that meant the arms of another man, not out of romance but strategy. Each new face carried the possibility of stability, of a future secured for herself and for her children. I didn't fully understand it then, but I sensed it: the calculation in her eyes, the way she weighed men not for love but for safety. She, too, was surviving the only way she knew how. I loved her fiercely because of that. She was strong even when she was weak. She was proof that survival wasn't always clean or graceful. And in watching her struggle and endure, I began to form my own determined resolve.

Sometimes, late at night, I would lie awake in bed, trying to catch a glimpse of the person I imagined I could be, somewhere far away. It wasn't play, not really. It was closer to prayer, a conversation with God, a private ritual where I could see, if only for a flicker, the shape of who I might become. The person I conjured in those moments felt as distant and luminous as the women on the pages of the books I read, and yet a vision lived inside me with a certainty and energy I could not ignore. And in that quiet, dreaming of a different existence, I began to sense that one day I could be—and would be—everything I imagined.

Chapter Three

At the age of nine, my childhood was forever altered. The dreams I whispered into the night still glowed faintly inside me, but the walls around them had begun to close in. My mother, worn thin by years of holding our lives together with nothing but grit and prayer, was desperate. Two growing children meant more food on the table, clothes that wore out too fast, and more bills to be paid. Her job wasn't cutting it. She needed help, and help came in the shape of a man—my stepfather.

He arrived without warning, as though crafted by her exhaustion. At first, he was quiet—too quiet, a presence that filled the house not with warmth but with a heavy silence. He promised stability, the kind my mother craved more than romance or tenderness. She wanted someone to steady the ground beneath her, someone to shoulder the burden of feeding, clothing, and raising two children in a world that never gave her a reprieve. But the stability he offered was not a gift. It was a curse.

Some days he was cordial, even polite, his voice measured and his movements restrained. Other days the smallest sound could shatter him—a spilled drink, a question not immediately answered, our simple presence. His rage was not always loud, but it was always sharp, slicing through us with words that bruised as deeply as any hand.

My mother bore the worst of it, her body stiffening under the lash of his voice, her eyes gone far away as though she had built a wall around her soul just to survive him. For me and my sister, fear became a second language. We learned to measure the hours of the day by the rhythm of his moods. Even in the quiet, he was volatile. The first thing he did was cut off my father: letters stopped; visits ended without explanation. It was as though the man who had given me life was erased—forbidden. My mother didn't fight it. She was too tired, too worn down by bills and loneliness to resist. And maybe, in her mind, surrendering to this man's rules seemed a small price to pay for the promise of a steady roof over our heads and a fridge that wasn't always half-empty.

Life in my stepfather's world rearranged itself quickly. Dinner became a ritual of tension. My mother served food with careful precision, as if presentation could ward off his disapproval. We ate fast, quietly, praying the meal would pass without incident. School mornings were no better—his glare at the door as we left, his voice sharp if we forgot something or moved too slowly. Nights were the worst. I lay awake listening for the sound of his footsteps in the hallway, my body stiff with dread as they moved toward my bedroom, my breath shallow until I was sure he had gone back to bed. It wasn't always violence, not in the way people sometimes imagine it.

It was the fear and unpredictability—the sudden switch from calm to fury, the invisible tripwire you only knew you'd crossed once it was too late. It was the constant readiness, the exhaustion of being on alert, the way laughter died in our throats before it had a chance to bloom. And yet, in the quiet times, my mother would gather us close and lead us in prayer. She spoke of peace as if it were waiting just beyond the walls of our home.

She instilled in us the belief that faith was not just survival but a way forward—that no matter how dark the nights became, God still held the power to deliver us. We clung to those prayers like lifelines, small circles of light in an unrelenting nightmare. My mother tried to shield us, but she was trapped too. She clung to him like a raft, even as he pulled us under. She told herself it was for us—that we needed the stability, the roof over our heads, the food. And maybe she believed it. I never stopped loving her for trying, even when I hated the choices she made. She was desperate, and her desperation forced a bargain she would have never considered in better times. For me, the bargain was silence. I learned to swallow words, to shrink myself, to disappear into corners with my books, and to hide in the places he couldn't find me. The bookstore that had once been my escape became my sanctuary more than ever. Within its shelves I could still slip into other worlds, still imagine a life where beauty and power were mine to wield, where men were conquered instead of feared. But at home, the cycle set in. The damage stretched on, year after year, etching itself into my bones, shaping the way I saw men, the way I saw love, the way I saw myself. I did not yet have the words for trauma, but I felt its capacity to demolish. Men became the enemy, and escape was no longer just something I longed for—it became my only hope for salvation.

Chapter Four

My teen years were torturous. I was a great student, but schoolwork was the only part of my life I could control. At home, I lived under siege. My mother was disappearing before my very eyes, caught in the grip of serious depression and alcoholism. The woman who loved to laugh, who filled the house with music and danced barefoot in the kitchen just to make us smile, was fading. The mother who once nurtured my love of stories and songs, who defended the parts of me that others mocked, now felt as far away to me as my real father. The years of mental abuse heaped on her by my stepfather had left her diminished, her spirit bruised. Now she carried a sadness that sat just beneath the surface, heavy with regret for bargains made at her children's expense—choices she may have believed were necessary but which slowly ate away at her.

And then, in a life that felt starved of light, a real friend appeared. Her name was Celeste.

She was older than me, thirty or so, a distant cousin whose arrival felt more like fate than family. Celeste was stylish and smart, with a tint of glamour that came not from money but from imagination and confidence. Even the ordinary felt brighter when she was around. She must have sensed I needed saving, because she began showing up at my house, her car humming with music that spilled into the street. To my mother she explained these outings as errands or family visits, but to me they were escapes—lifelines. In Celeste's world, the air was lighter, and I was free from the shadows of my house.

The first time we went back to her apartment, I stepped into a space that pulsed with life. Records leaned against the wall, fashion and music magazines sprawled across the table, hair products and cosmetics crowding the bathroom counter. And there, sitting comfortably on the sofa with Celeste's little girl curled against her side, was Celeste's mother, a face vaguely remembered from my childhood.

She looked up and beamed with recognition. "Well, look at him," she said, reaching out to touch my arm. "I used to babysit when he was just a baby. And of course, I was close to your Tía Rosie—such a good woman. She loved you like her own."

The mention of my aunt pulled at something deep inside me. My Tía had been a steady presence when my mother was young and struggling, almost a second mother to me in those early years. Hearing her name spoken here, in this apartment alive with music and color, reminded me that family wasn't just hardship and silence. There were roots, connections, people who had held me even before I could remember.

Celeste's daughter slid off her grandmother's lap and came running across the room, arms flung around my waist. I froze for a moment, startled by her easy trust, then patted her back awkwardly. Celeste caught my eye, smiling as though she understood the weight of that small embrace.

Her mother rose and gathered her things, then motioned to me. "Take care of him," she said to Celeste, giving her granddaughter one last kiss before heading toward the door. She paused for a moment, looking back at me with a mix of fondness and gravity. "Give your mother my best. Let her know I asked about her," she said softly, then let herself out.

The room felt different after she left. It was still bright, but touched with history, like I had stepped into a story that had been written long before I arrived.

Celeste moved to the record player, dropped the needle, and Janis Joplin's voice poured out of the speakers. It was raw, jagged, shredded with longing—a primal scream of pain that clawed its way through the air and lodged deep inside my chest. It hit me like a ton of bricks. That voice, and the power of it, would follow me through the decades of my life, mirroring my own secret ache.

Celeste watched my face, took a drag from her cigarette, and said quietly, "It hurts, doesn't it?"

Before I could answer, the door opened and Roberto swept in, tall and theatrical, a silk shirt hanging open at his chest. He carried a paper bag in one hand and wore eyeliner smudged just so.

"Celeste, darling, I brought wine!" he sang out, then stopped when he saw me. "And who is this handsome young man?"

"This is my cousin," Celeste said, pulling me closer. "He's with us now."

Roberto set the bag down and enveloped me in a hug that smelled of cologne and tobacco. "You're safe here," he said softly before leaning back

and grinning. "But if you stick around us, you'd better get used to a little flavor."

The room erupted in laughter, and to my surprise, I laughed too. That night, with Janis wailing from the record player, Celeste's daughter asleep in the next room, and Roberto spinning outrageous stories about his adventures the night before that made everyone howl, I felt something I hadn't felt in years: **I was free.**

Later, after the laughter had ebbed and Roberto had gone, Celeste and I sat in her living room, bathed in the soft glow from a streetlamp outside the window. Her daughter slept in the next room. The record player had gone silent. Outside, a siren wailed and faded.

I don't know what made me break open in that moment—maybe the quiet, maybe the way she'd looked at me all evening as though I belonged. The words came fast. I told her about the loneliness and shame I felt at home. My mother's drinking. My stepfather's cruelty. The fear and secrets I carried like weights.

And then—my voice cracked. I admitted what I had never said aloud, not even to myself: that I was drawn to men, that their beauty, their strength, made me ache with longing and confusion. The tears came. I wept for the family I didn't feel connected to, for the life that felt impossible, for the dreams of glamour and freedom I had only borrowed from books and movies.

Celeste didn't interrupt. She just listened, her eyes steady on mine. When she finally spoke, her voice was quiet, sure. "This is a lot to take in. I don't have all the answers. But one day, your life will belong to you. You'll make the choices that make sense to you. Your happiness depends on being exactly who you were meant to be. You can't let anyone derail you."

Her words sank deep. She leaned closer, serious now. "Is there something I can do?"

No one had ever asked me that—not like that. I wiped my face. Took a deep breath. My answer surprised me. "I want to go to a gay bar."

Celeste paused, then shrugged, a small reassuring smile. "Let's go to a gay bar."

I was sixteen years old.

Chapter Five

The streets around The Paradise Lounge on Nebraska Avenue, in Tampa's seediest stretch, were not the kind you lingered on. Neon signs flickered half-dead above pawnshops and shuttered storefronts, their glow pooling faintly across broken sidewalks. The air smelled of gasoline and something sour, like spilled beer gone sticky. Figures moved in and out of shadows: a woman adjusting her skirt, a man pacing and drinking from a bottle, people sleeping on benches and in abandoned doorways.

The bar stood on a tract of land that felt forgotten, its blacked-out windows and plain door concealing the decadence that lay beyond. Inside was another world. Smoke curled lazily under dim lights, not a haze so much as a veil, making everything look blurred. The air carried the musk of cologne, cigarettes, and bodies too close together. A single long bar stretched down the center like a spine, its slick surface crowded with men in denim and leather, their voices pitched low at first, then erupting into sudden bursts of laughter that made me jump. To the left, a small stage waited with its velvet curtain drawn, while a pair of drag queens whispered conspiratorially and watched the crowd.

I'd had only one beer with Celeste and Roberto before we left the apartment, yet I felt intoxicated, my pulse quickened, my senses lit. Eyes turned toward me, curious, appraising. I didn't know where to rest my gaze. Every smile felt like a spotlight. I gripped the edge of the bar and tried to steady myself.

But before the attention could swallow me whole, the door opened again and a figure stepped through that made everything else vanish.

The woman was tall, blonde, and impossibly luminous, her beauty dramatic enough to silence everyone in the room. She had the kind of face that could make you believe in stories, all angles and cheekbones, with a dazzling smile for every person she passed. She tossed her hair, cascading down her back in luscious waves, gliding through the room with a glow that seemed almost otherworldly.

At her side was a man, tall and broad-shouldered, his shirt stretched tight across his muscular chest. He shadowed her like a bodyguard, carrying her bags, his expression unreadable. Unlike most of the men in the room, he didn't seem to be scanning the crowd or interested in the glances cast his way. He carried himself with authority and the casual ease of someone who knew his strength. Everything about him read straight, masculine, untouchable, and somewhat out of place.

I was dazzled by them. And as my eyes lingered on that moment, I realized I had never truly understood the power of beauty, that kind of physical, aesthetic beauty: that it could be so immediate, so commanding, so real.

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The show started at midnight. The dazzling blonde was named Crystal Clear, and she was the star of this clandestine theater. A drag show in the late '80s wasn't something you stumbled into—it was something hidden, carried out in spaces that felt half-dangerous, half-sacred. It was decades before the art form would be mainstreamed by RuPaul's Drag Race. This was raw, illicit performance, staged in a haze of smoke and shadows for an audience that craved escape and release.

The stage was barely a platform, the velvet curtain threadbare in the light, but when Crystal stepped out, sequins caught the dim glow and threw it back like fire. Music pounded through cheap speakers, and the room surged as if a dam had given way. Men pressed closer to the stage, bills in their hands, their voices breaking open into cheers.

She lip-synced to a torch song, her mouth precise, her hands fluttering as though every lyric were an extension of her own experience. One moment she was a siren, the next a tragic heroine. Even the drag queens waiting their turn paused to watch, their faces lit with admiration.

Celeste looked on transfixed, her eyes glowing, her lips moving to the music. Roberto sat back in his chair, grinning broadly, shouting his approval between swallows of beer. I glanced at them both, envying their ease, their absolute comfort in this surreal, electric world.

I had never seen anything like it—not in a movie, not in a book, not even in the stray fantasies I nursed in secret. It felt taboo, transgressive, like we were all in on something forbidden and special. And in that moment, I knew. The world outside felt sharp and hostile, but here, in this place with

these people, I wasn't strange or out of place. I was part of it, swept up in its rhythm, its laughter, its hunger for something brighter than the lives we lived outside those blacked-out windows. This was my wonderland. I was home.

Chapter Six

I started spending less and less time inside the house I grew up in and more time in the life I was discovering. In my final year of high school, I was moving between gay pool parties at Roberto's and long weekends at Celeste's. At first, the shift felt clumsy, then steadier, more certain. My sister—two years older, already with a small roundness to her belly and a man my mother had loudly disapproved of—was a presence I no longer knew how to reach. We had always orbited different planes; she was given to the bright, immediate business of her own desires, the small dramas that never became my dramas. She would show up suddenly and confront me with her explosive one-liners—"I'm pregnant"—and leave before I could find the right thing to say. My mother's distrust of my sister's boyfriend only tightened the distance in our family.

One weekend, Celeste said, "Let's go see your father," as though it were the simplest plan in the world. I began to protest, but she insisted. The correctional facility was three hours away. She drove. The highway blurred into fields, and for a moment I felt like a kid again. It had been years since I'd traveled those flat back roads, their stretches of cheap motels, fruit stands, and diners passing like old acquaintances. The towns we drifted through seemed smaller now, hollowed out by time, the paint peeling from storefronts. Once they had felt bustling to me, full of color and noise; now they looked weary, as though neglected in favor of the interstate that pulled travelers elsewhere.

I'd been writing my dad letters for months, timid postage-stamp apologies and small updates, and the thought of seeing him—of seeing the man who'd once swung so easily between charm and abandonment—tightened something in my chest. I had not seen my father in nearly eight years, and a heightened sense of nervousness crawled through me as I thought about the physical changes I was beginning to explore. I worried he might not see me the same way I remembered him seeing me, that the years apart would make us strangers.

I still dressed in the awkward, androgynous version of boyishness I'd adopted because it felt safe. But my hair was longer, softened at the temples, and a new gentleness rounded my face. There was something unnameable settling into me, an aura I could neither hide nor deny. In the visitation yard, behind the high fence, I felt it ripple outward in the way men glanced up from their tables, then quickly looked away. It wasn't mockery, and it wasn't desire exactly—it was a kind of startled recognition, as if they had caught sight of something they wanted but that didn't fit their rules of the yard.

Still, none of them said a word. My father was a shot caller, a man whose reputation carried weight, and they watched him as he stepped up to embrace me. Whatever surprise flickered in their eyes at me was quieted by who he was, by the fact that I was his.

He was older, his hair streaked with silver, the lines at his mouth deeper. But when he smiled, I recognized the swagger I had loved as a child: the half-tilt of his head, the bad boy cockiness that made him so appealing. He came to me like a tide, all warmth and sudden insistence, and for a moment I felt the entirety of my childhood return. There weren't many memories to draw from—our time together outside of prison had been brief and scattered—but the ones I did have burned bright.

I thought of Apollo Beach, a dramatic few nights we had together after he had managed to escape during a prison transfer. The police eventually caught up with us, but I still remember the way he looked as they dragged him away from his screaming family. I thought of another escape too, the time he'd paid the Easter Bunny at the mall to personally deliver a giant Easter basket to me at the safe house where we were hiding out. They were reckless, absurd, unforgettable times—but they were ours.

All of it compressed into that single embrace. He held me tight, like someone trying to make up for a long absence by squashing it flat between us.

We sat at a large picnic table in the yard, surrounded by an army of dangerous men, the hard concrete scraping my palms. He wanted to know everything: who I was spending my time with, whether I was happy, what my plans were. From time to time, he wiped tears from his eyes, blaming a sensitivity to the sun.

There came a point when the conversation thinned and something heavier settled between us. I told him, in a small voice that surprised even me, about home. I said the words carefully and thoughtfully. I told him

about my stepfather—about the nights that were not safe, about the things that made the house feel like a battlefield. I told him about my mother's drinking, how she had been carried away by the bottle until she was someone I watched rather than knew.

He listened like a man receiving news from the other side of a war. At first there was silence, the kind that has weight; then his face changed. Rage was a physical thing in him: the set of his jaw, the way he held his hands as if he might clamp them around something and squeeze. He swallowed hard, and I watched him clench his fists until the knuckles shone white. Tears pooled in the corners of his eyes, not from softness but from the shock that someone had hurt me in the ways I was describing. He leaned back and looked away from me, but spoke finally, his voice low and hard. "That Motherfucker! That dirty motherfucker. I'll kill that son of a bitch. I'll fucking have him killed. Tomorrow."

The words hit the table between us like a clap. For a second the yard was a held thing—breaths paused, a few heads turned, then dropped. I knew him well enough to know he meant it. But I was older now, and a different fear lived inside me. I reached for his hand, feeling the rough skin and the tremor there. "No," I told him. "No, Daddy. Don't say that. I don't want that."

I wanted to soothe him the way he had soothed me when I was small and would cry out as we were leaving him behind following one of our visits. But I also wanted to be clear, to anchor in the small certainty I had found. "For me," I said, "the life that includes him is over. I'm leaving. I'm starting over. That's what matters." The words felt like stepping off a lip into cold water—terrifying, but cleansing.

He stared at me for a long time, the battle between protection and fury moving across his face. Then he reached for me again and squeezed. "You do what you have to do," he said, voice rough. "You get out of there. You be the person you want to be, whatever that means to you. You're mine and I am always going to love you. Always."

We talked for hours after that, filling in the missing years with stories and apologies and reckless promises. He asked me about Celeste and listened when I said her name like a blessing. He told me, in fits and starts, about the prison chaplain and a book he'd started reading, about the small routines that kept him sane.

When the time came to say goodbye, he reached into his shirt and pulled out a small gold crucifix on a thin chain. The metal was worn smooth

at the edges, the gold dulled by years of being held and hidden. "This is all I've got left," he said, pressing it into my hand. "Almost twenty years, and this is the only thing they didn't take from me."

I closed my fingers around it, the delicate weight pressing into my skin, more precious than anything I had ever been given. I looked up, ready to thank him, but before I could speak, he pulled me into his arms.

This time he did not let go quickly. His embrace was fierce, almost desperate, his arms locking around me with a strength that felt both protective and pleading. It was as if he were trying to hold together the broken years between us, to stitch time back into something whole with the sheer force of his body against mine. My cheek pressed into the fabric of his prison shirt, and I breathed in the faint scent of soap and metal, a smell that would anchor itself in memory.

The embrace seemed to widen the prison yard, to push back the guards, the fences, the other families murmuring around us. For a moment there was no prison, no years lost, no stepfather or mother's drinking, no shame, no silence. Just the sweep of my father's love, crashing over me with the force of something larger than either of us, something I had waited too long to feel again.

And in that sweep, I felt everything at once: the small child who used to wait for him to come home, the teenager who had cried in secret, the almost-woman I was becoming, balancing on the edge of revelation. It was as if he were embracing every version of me at once, binding them together, declaring with his arms what words could never reach. Time folded in on itself, the past and the present collapsing into a single heartbeat.

When he finally loosened his hold, his eyes were wet and mine were too. The crucifix still lay warm in my hand, a fragile gleam of gold between us, a promise that even inside walls and barbed wire, love had found its way back to me.

Outside, the late sun slanted low across the parking lot and Celeste's car looked like a small warm harbor. I climbed in, the crucifix still hot in my palm. Celeste glanced at me as I shut the door, her eyes steady, patient. No words were exchanged—none were needed. In that silence passed all the understanding in the world: her quiet strength, my gratitude for her love and friendship, the certainty that I was not alone. And for the first time in a long while, I felt like a person moving toward a life I might finally recognize as mine.

Chapter Seven

The Carousel was a gay bar of some renown in Tampa, mostly for all the wrong reasons. It inhabited a nondescript narrow building off Platt Street, its walls mirrored and its ceilings low. A pool table dominated the back right corner of the room. A flickering Budweiser sign cast a brighter light than the stage itself, and the bathrooms smelled of sex and cheap beer. This was no glittering palace of illusion, no grand stage where legends were crowned. This was a holding pen for desire—a dive where straight men danced for money and drugs, for men who came to forget themselves. It was a place that survived on shadows.

But when Esme Russell took the stage, the shadows lifted.

She didn't perform with others. She certainly didn't blend. She was the show, and the Carousel bent itself around her presence as if the dirty little space were merely a frame for her portrait. Her body was flawless, a weapon of curves and sharpness, her beauty so visually arresting it literally took your breath away. She carried herself as though the room owed her its undivided attention, as though the bar and everyone in it existed only to magnify her glow. But ego has its price, and Esme never paid it gracefully. She was too big, too dazzling, too unwilling to bow. The grand stages that once crowned her had tired of her demands, her refusal to share, her appetite for chaos. And so, she had been exiled here, to The Carousel. Yet even exile could not diminish her. If this bar was her cage, she paced it like a panther.

That night, watching her under the low ceilings and flickering lights as she stripped to a corset and G-string, I understood: she was a harbinger; everything I had been dreaming about and moving toward without knowing it. Esme wasn't just a drag queen. She was proof. And in the quiet of my awe, a single thought took root—one that would follow me, haunt me, and eventually drive me: I could be like her. I will be like her.

After the show I lingered near the bar, too nervous to move closer, but unwilling to leave. The room hummed with chatter, men returning to their drinks, but my eyes stayed locked on Esme as she crossed the floor. She didn't rush. She let people part for her. She let them wait.

When she finally stopped in front of me, it felt less like chance and more like design.

"You've been staring all night," she said, her voice low and husky, wrapped in smoke. A smile curved at the corner of her mouth, not warm exactly but inviting.

I stammered something—I don't even remember what. Maybe hello, maybe nothing at all.

Esme tilted her head, her gorgeous mane of fiery red hair falling like a curtain over one shoulder. "Everyone stares. I'm used to it." She slid a manicured hand down her waist, the gesture was deliberate, like she was presenting herself as evidence. "They call me The Body Beautiful for a reason. There isn't a woman or a queen in this city with a body like this, not even the strippers at Mons."

Although her vanity was extraordinary, it didn't feel boastful. She was stating a fact as she believed it, as casually as if she were telling me the time.

"You're a pretty boy," she said after a beat, her eyes scanning me the way a jeweler inspects a stone, tilting it against the light.

My silence seemed to amuse her. She leaned in, close enough for me to catch the sweetness of her perfume.

"Do you have a car?" she asked.

"Yes," I replied.

"Great," she said. "I need a ride."

And just like that, I went from stranger to familiar. The ride I offered that night granted me unfettered access to her netherworld—a smoky dominion that came alive after midnight, populated by queens and hustlers, dealers and dreamers, the crème de la crème and fallen wreckage of Tampa's gay nightlife. It was a world that promised everything and devoured just as much, fueled by desire, alcohol—and cocaine.

Chapter Eight

The Bridge Club wasn't a club. It was a warehouse buried deep in the commercial sprawl of Tampa's Town & Country neighborhood. It didn't open until 3 a.m., which told you everything you needed to know. By the time you got there, the rest of the city was either unconscious or in jail, and whoever stumbled through its doors was looking for something they hadn't found earlier: the restless, the reckless, the ones unwilling to call it a night.

It was cavernous and dim, the kind of place where you lost hours—sometimes days—where people chopped lines of cocaine on sticky tables without bothering to hide it.

Esme slid through the chaos like she was built for it, all attitude and mystique that cut through the noise. I followed her, wide-eyed, cataloguing everything: the glassy stares, the queens I had never seen before—some striking, others with smeared lipstick and wild eyes clutching men they didn't know—the music thudding like a pulse that kept the whole fire burning.

It wasn't polished. The floor was slippery, the ceiling too high and too dark, and the music hit like a body blow. Tables were littered with glasses, straws, plastic baggies left out in the open.

And yet, despite the grime and grit—or maybe because of it—there was a pull. A pulse in the room that tugged at me, something half-recognized. I imagined my father moving through spaces like this—lawless, nocturnal, dangerous—but this was different. This was younger, wilder, less ordinary. And as I followed Esme, I felt myself falling into it, craving more of what I shouldn't.

For all its shock, the Bridge didn't feel entirely foreign. Celeste and Roberto's initiation had already prepared me for rooms like this—dark, messy, charged. But unlike them, this place wasn't about protection or play. It was about surrender. And they had already begun to fade from my life as I found new ways to entertain myself.

The music hit harder the deeper we went, the rooms alive with bodies and noise. I caught a flash of familiarity, an old friend at the beginning of her transition: Lissette. She was tucked near the edge of the dance floor with a few friends, reserved as ever, her smile soft and careful. A reminder that the world outside still existed. I might have stopped, but Esme was already pulling me forward.

She steered me toward a corner table where her friends were holding court, and that's when I saw H.

We had history, but it was deeper than connections you make in a place like this. H was one of my first real friends and one of the first people I ever felt safe and free with. We used to take his Camaro out at night, driving with no destination, ending up at the beach or parked in some empty lot, talking about everything and nothing. Sometimes we'd make out, not because either of us thought it would last, but because it felt good to practice on someone who understood. We were both coming out in our own ways, fumbling through it together, and that kind of bond never really leaves you. H had the kind of beauty that pulled everyone in, without even trying. Cuban features so refined that his face dazzled even under the dim light of the club.

Beside him was Ricky, a Puerto Rican dancer and sometime female impersonator, sitting close with his arm across the back of H's chair. The two of them had that new-couple sexual energy that was obvious and electric.

And then there was Frank. The legendary Frank Gomez.

He took up space, round and suspicious, eyeing me with an intense curiosity I had never felt before. The aura he carried matched his largesse, filling the corner of the room so completely it felt as though we were stepping into his airspace.

His eyes narrowed on me, sharp and inquisitive, and his voice carried over the music: "Miss Thing! Have you ever done drag?"

Esme burst out laughing, incredulous, quick to deflect. "With that nose?" she shot back, her laughter edged with mockery.

Frank snapped his head toward her, meeting her eyes dead-on, his expression daring her to say more. "I saw past your nose, didn't I?" he said, his tone like a challenge. Then he turned back to me. "Well? Have you ever done drag?"

I shook my head, my voice barely audible over the music. "I've never done drag."

"If you ever want to," Frank said, matter-of-fact, "I'll help you." He waved off Esme's attempts to interrupt, his eyes still locked on me. "The queens will never want you to do it because they hate competition."

He leaned forward, his hand suddenly on my face, turning me slightly toward the faintest strip of light so he could see my profile. His gaze sharpened, dissecting every angle. "You're so small. Your bone structure is exquisite. I can help you."

The weight of his words pressed into me, and I paused, trying to understand the force behind them. Finally, I asked, "Why would you want to?"

He pulled out a bullet of cocaine and offered me a bump. He waited for the powder to hit me, until he saw my eyes gleam with a rush I couldn't disguise.

Then he answered, as succinct as it was final: "Because that's what I do. I create beautiful things, my darling. I take boys like you—and I make them Goddesses."

Chapter Nine

I was nearly eighteen now, high school a closed chapter I never cared to reread. The world had cracked open in front of me, shimmering with possibility. Though I still technically lived at home, I was hardly ever there, choosing instead to punch the clock at a dull office job by day and disappear into the night as soon as the sun went down. My nights stretched longer and longer, and mornings at the desk became a never-ending chorus of heavy eyelids and unfinished work.

Most evenings, I didn't go home at all. Sometimes I collapsed on Frank's couch, lulled by the hum of his sewing machine, or found refuge in Ricky's apartment. Ricky was different—less a mentor and more an older brother I hadn't known I needed. Protective, generous to a fault, he would have given me the shirt off his back without hesitation. Ricky grew up in the streets, raised by drag queens and hardened by years of looking out for himself. By the time I met him in his late twenties, he carried that history with him, wearing it like armor. He was street smart and resourceful, doing whatever he had to do to survive and get by, yet there was nothing jaded about him. Like me, he was well read and endlessly curious. His presence had a grounding weight that made me feel safe just being near him.

Esme was still there. She watched me drift closer to Frank and Ricky with the wary eyes of someone guarding her claim. Jealousy sharpened her edges. Suspicion hardened her tone. More than once, she pulled me aside and whispered warnings not to trust them. To her, they were dangerous men who could swallow me whole if I wasn't careful. But the more she cautioned, the more I slipped into their orbit. Where Esme saw threat, I felt possibility.

The nightlife welcomed me without question. Clubs, drag pageants, after-hours dives—anywhere Frank and Ricky went, I followed, moving through rooms like I belonged, even when I was still only learning how to carry myself. Drinks were pressed into my hand before I even thought to ask, and with every toast and every cheer, I learned how easy it was to drift,

to let go. Cocaine wasn't a habit yet, just a glittering temptation passed around in bullets and bumps, enough to make the music brighter, the night longer.

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The changes happened quickly, like scenes in a movie. Miami in the early '90s was a different world. A burgeoning international art scene collided with club kids, European playboys, and hustlers on the make. Salsa and Latin beats spilled out of Art Deco facades, the city throbbing with a reckless kind of glamour that captivated me. Frank moved through it as if it were his natural stage. He had business there—designing gowns for a contestant in the Miss Gay Universe pageant—and I was swept into his cycle of never-ending action, no longer just a companion but part of the spectacle.

The city saw me differently. With my long hair and slight frame, strangers called me "girl" without hesitation, and instead of correcting them, I let it happen. Each slip felt less like a mistake and more like affirmation.

Frank noticed too. One night, bent over a gown under the glow of a sewing lamp, he looked up and studied me for a long moment. His voice softened, almost tender. "It's time to stop with this androgyny and half-drag you're doing," he said. "The boy served you well up to this point, but it's time to leave him behind. Thank him. Honor him. And release him."

His words hit me fast and deep, a permission I had been waiting for. I sat in silence, feeling both fear and relief wash over me. There was no ceremony, no ritual, just the quiet shedding of a skin that no longer fit.

Then Frank's tone shifted, crisp and commanding. "Darling, you can't keep drifting nameless through this world. You need an identity. A banner to march beneath."

That was the night Sophia was born.

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What followed unspooled like a reel of quick cuts. Hormones passed in whispered exchanges, tiny pills pressed into my palm with the kind of secrecy reserved for contraband. I swallowed them without hesitation, each dose a quiet rebellion, a step further from the boy I had been.

A backroom clinic added its own flourish. A minor silicone enhancement sharpened my cheekbones—subtle, but enough to catch light in a

way that made my reflection startling, even to me. The changes were small, almost imperceptible at first, but together they gave me edges and angles I had only imagined.

Nights in Miami blurred into a kaleidoscope: champagne bubbles rising in smoky clubs, sex with strangers. I drifted through it all with Frank always in motion, and Ricky steadying me when the nights stretched too far.

One night, we found ourselves at a crowded nightclub, dancing and drinking with Joey Stefano, the gay porn star whose name was already legend after starring with Madonna in her Sex book. He was beautiful and reckless, living in the moment and for the moment, as if he had nothing to lose. He pulled me close, arm slung casually across my shoulders, and for a moment I felt folded into a world larger than anything Tampa had ever promised. I didn't know it then, but Joey would become a friend, a confidant—someone who understood the pieces of me yet to take shape, forged in a world of shared experiences still to come.

By the time we drove back to Tampa, the boy I had been was gone. In his place, Sophia had emerged—still raw, still unsteady, but an undeniable beauty starting to form.

Chapter Ten

Physical changes were happening quickly, and I couldn't keep hiding what was happening in oversized sweats every time I encountered my family. The time had come to have a real conversation with my mother.

We sat at the kitchen table, the late afternoon light streaming across the room with a brightness that seemed to momentarily lift the unease I always felt in my childhood home. She folded her hands in front of her, waiting. For once, there was no glass of wine between us.

"Mom," I said, my voice unsteady, "I need you to really hear me right now."

Her brow creased, and she tilted her head slightly, waiting for me to continue. A pause lingered between us, long enough for the hum of the refrigerator to grow loud. Finally, she gave the smallest of nods. "I'm listening."

I drew a breath that felt like it might break me. "I'm not your son. I never was. I'm... becoming who I was meant to be. I'm transitioning. Into the daughter you've always had, even if you didn't know it."

The words seemed to hang in the air, trembling, fragile. She looked down at her clasped hands, her silence stretching out, tears rising slowly in her eyes. For a moment she seemed far away, staring into some private distance, lost in years of memory.

Her mouth opened, then closed. She pressed her lips together, a tear escaping unchecked, sliding down her cheek. When she finally looked at me, her gaze was blurred but steady.

She reached across the table and covered my hand with hers—warm, trembling, but certain. "I... I felt something," she whispered. "Not the details, but... the truth of you. And I want you to know..." Her voice caught; she stopped, breathed, steadied herself. Then, with a clarity that cut through everything else, she said: "I love you. However you are, whoever you are. That doesn't change."

My vision blurred. "You mean that?"

She held my hand tighter, her eyes softening in a way I hadn't seen in years. "I mean it with all I have left to give. You are my baby—my beautiful baby. And I will support you in this. I promise."

The silence that followed was thick with something sacred. I let myself collapse into her arms, and she held me close. For the first time in so long, I felt her completely present—no alcohol-induced haze, no distance. Just my mother.

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After my mother held me, I felt lighter and heavier all at once. Lighter because I had been seen, maybe for the first time. Heavier because the path ahead was suddenly real, no longer some private dream I could hide beneath baggy clothes.

Questions pressed against me like waves: What would life look like? Where would the money come from to begin my changes—the hormones, the surgeries, the clothes that would make me feel at home in my own skin? What would my future hold if I followed this truth to its end?

I got in the car and drove until the road gave way to sand and water. The beach was nearly empty, just a handful of gulls skimming the tide and the endless hiss of waves collapsing against the shore. I walked for a long time, the wind tangling in my hair, my thoughts looping in restless circles.

As the horizon darkened into early evening, I found myself doing something I hadn't done in years: slipping back into the private conversations I used to have when I was younger. Conversations with God. Not the God of Sunday sermons, but the one I spoke to alone, whispering in the dark when no one else could hear me.

Help me, I thought, sure in the existence of the one I was addressing. Show me a way forward. Let me believe this life isn't just about suffering.

And then, as clear as the wind on my face, the voice inside me rose up, the same one that had carried me through all the other storms of my life. *It's going to work out for you. Maybe not quickly, maybe not easily—but it will. You are meant for more than this.*

I let the tide creep over my bare feet, grounding me in the rhythm of the earth. For a moment, the panic quieted, replaced by something gentler. Not certainty, but possibility.

By the time I turned back toward the car, the sky was streaked with violet and gold, and a new clarity took root. It was time to formulate a

responsible plan of action, to begin piecing together how I would move forward into the life that was waiting for me. But first—one final good time, at least for now, was ahead.

Ricky and I were headed to Key West, that strange and fantastic island on the edge of the world, a place that would come to hold incredible significance for me in the years to come. And it was there, amid the heat and rum and salt-soaked air, that I first encountered Liza.

Liza—legendary, magnetic, larger than life. A straight woman in a gay world, dangerous in her allure, formidable in her power, adored and feared in equal measure.

Chapter Eleven

The moment Ricky and I hit Duval Street, it felt like we had crossed some invisible border into another reality. The air was heavy and wet, and the scent of cigars swirled in a haze that clung to the street, mingling with liquor and sea-salt heat. Neon flashes in the dark, bouncing off faces and bodies pressed together in the streets. For the first time in my life, I saw men openly holding hands on public streets, leaning into one another, kissing like they had nothing to hide. The sight stole my breath—it was liberation made flesh, brazen and unapologetic.

The street itself was a collision of worlds. Outlaw bikers leaned against their Harleys, tattoos glowing under the lamps, while drag queens in fairy wings swept past them like royalty. Music thumped from every doorway—guitars, disco, calypso—all competing for dominance. Laughter erupted in bursts that carried above it all, sharp and unrestrained, the sound of good times being had. Everyone seemed untethered from the rules I had grown up with, moving as though shame had never existed.

It was hot, tropical heat rising off the pavement, clinging to my skin. I felt like I had stepped into a fever dream where sin wasn't something to hide from but to embrace. Duval wasn't just a street; it was a theater of possibility, and I was both spectator and apprentice, ferociously taking it all in.

Ricky tugged me down a side street, away from the noise and chaos of Duval. "One stop first," he said, grinning. "You're gonna love her."

The building we approached was nothing like the flaking pastel facades we'd passed. It was pristine, its whitewashed balconies spilling with bougainvillea, tall windows gleaming in the glow of lantern light. From the upper floors, you could hear the water itself—lapping, insistent, close. It was the kind of place that whispered money, even before the door opened.

And then it did.

Liza filled the frame in fitted jeans and a tight black tee, her body casual but her presence anything but. Her hair was enormous—diva hair, all wild glamour and command, and she wore it like a crown. She took

Ricky in first, arms flung around him with a squeal that echoed down the hall. Then her eyes slid to me, curious and assessing, already working me over with an intensity that felt equal parts welcome and warning.

She ushered us inside with a flick of her hand, no hesitation, no question of whether we belonged there. A bottle of champagne was already sweating in a silver bucket, and she poured it generously into tall flutes, the bubbles snapping under the light. On a low lacquered table, a mirrored tray gleamed—lines of cocaine cut with surgical precision. She pushed it toward Ricky with a knowing smile but didn't so much as glance in my direction.

Other than the quick introduction at the door, she said little to me. Her attention stayed fixed on Ricky, her voice animated as they traded Tampa gossip—who had burned bridges, who had disappeared, who had resurfaced in new guises. She laughed easily with him, tossing her hair, eyes dark and glistening.

I sat on the edge of a loveseat, looking out at the ocean, champagne glass sweating in my hand, trying not to look like the afterthought I suddenly felt myself to be. Ricky and Liza were locked in their own world, laughter pinging between them like no time had passed. Every so often she'd toss her curls back and fix him with that conspiratorial grin, the kind that made you feel as though you were being invited into something—and I wasn't.

Her silence toward me wasn't rude, exactly. It was more deliberate, like I was being measured. Watched. I couldn't decide if she was ignoring me or studying me. Either way, I felt exposed, caught between wanting her attention and resenting the fact that I didn't have it.

The apartment was all glass and light, polished hardwood gleaming underfoot, modern lines softened by art and lush fabrics. From the wide balcony, the sea lay just beyond, glinting in the dusk. The champagne was crisp, the view a seduction, but all I could feel was that I had been momentarily erased, reduced to Ricky's shadow in a room that seemed designed to remind me of my smallness.

When Ricky mentioned his show later that night at The Copa, her lips curved into a slow, deliberate smile. "Of course," she said. "Wouldn't miss it."

She rose and crossed to the balcony doors, pulling them open. The early night air rushed in, warm and briny, carrying the sound of water lapping against the shore. She stood framed there, glass in hand, the ocean and sunset behind her like a stage. Ricky laughed at something she murmured,

and it was evident they belonged to a world I hadn't yet been granted access to.

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The Copa was nothing like the bars on Duval. It was a legendary gay club, a world unto itself. Inside, the air was charged, thick with cologne and sweat, the stage awash in light where go-go boys in jockstraps teased the crowd with every measured thrust and turn.

When Ricky stepped out as Syreeta Montiel, the room erupted. Gone was the brother I knew from Tampa—Syreeta was pure diva, her hips snapping to the music, her mouth alive with the lyrics, every gesture sculpted into something dramatic and seductive. She caught the spotlight, her moves dancing across the wall like fragments of glass, sharp and everywhere at once.

The night blurred into decadence. Shots of tequila filled my glass, strangers pressed against me on the dance floor, and the music throbbed through my chest until I couldn't tell where the sound ended and my body began. I was too young to be there, too drunk to stay upright, but it felt glamorous and I didn't care.

It was Liza who saw me falter. One moment I was laughing, the next her hand was on Ricky's arm as he slipped offstage, her voice pitched low but certain. "She's about to fall out," she said, eyes never leaving mine. "Do something before she gets us all tossed."

Ricky's face appeared through the haze, Syreeta stripped away, sweat shining on his brow. He reached me just as my knees buckled, catching me before I slid to the floor. I clung to him, the world tilting sideways, and then Liza pressed something into his hand. A mirrored compact, the powder lined and waiting.

"She needs to straighten up," she said smoothly.

Ricky dragged me through the crowd and into the bathroom, shoving us both into a stall. He flipped the compact open, the fluorescent light catching on the fine white lines. "Now," he muttered, holding it steady.

I bent forward, the sting shooting through my nose, raw and immediate. And then—clarity. The fog of alcohol tore away, every sound sharp, every color alive, my heartbeat racing like it wanted to break through my chest.

And in that moment, something went off in my brain, like a switch I hadn't known existed. Visions of Michelle Pfeiffer in Scarface washed over me—an image I carried for years, more aspiration than warning. I finally felt it. I felt the heightened euphoria my friends who used had always talked about. The thirst was immediate, unrelenting. And I wanted more.

Chapter Twelve

Key West faded behind me like a dream in the rearview. For weeks I carried the high of it, the taste of powder still burning in my memory, but something in me knew it was time to move on. I had crossed the threshold—now the real work of *becoming* had to begin. Like Celeste and Roberto before them, Esme, Frank, and Ricky began receding from my everyday life. They weren't gone, just a little more removed, as I retreated inward to do the work that needed to be done.

The changes in my body were already there, subtle but undeniable. At five foot seven and barely a hundred and fifteen pounds, I was small, almost delicate compared to most of the trans girls in the scene. My face had evolved into something striking, exotic, beautiful even. Dark Mediterranean curls spilled over my shoulders—my real hair, wild and sexy. My makeup was no longer costume; it was precision. I had learned how to shade and soften, to pull the eye upward, arch the brow perfectly, and bring balance without excess. It accentuated everything without tipping into drag, a whisper of power in each contour and line.

Unlike many of my contemporaries, I wasn't chasing cartoonish proportions through gallons of injected silicone. I found a trusted black-market injector and used it conservatively, enhancing rather than distorting. And while most of the girls treated muscle as taboo, I diverged—I worked out religiously, honing my body at the gym and through yoga until it was lean, athletic, fit. The combination gave me an edge. Where others leaned toward exaggeration, I was sculpting something more realistic, more deliberate—a beauty that carried power, and one that could pass muster in a world beyond the ghetto of gay bars and restaurants.

Even my chest had changed—the beginnings of breasts, small but swelling into an A cup. I studied them with curiosity, not worship. As the vision in the mirror sharpened, I felt no emotional or mental shift beyond elation. I didn't look in the mirror and believe I was a woman—or

becoming a woman—not in the way most trans people said they did, or believed they did. That had never been my truth.

It unsettled even me sometimes, the way my *self-identity* refused to line up with the medical scripts of gender dysphoria. I didn't feel haunted by the wrong body, and I didn't look in the mirror with the certainty of *I always knew*. I hadn't known—not in that way. I wasn't chasing some hidden female- self that was waiting to be freed. What I was doing didn't fit into tidy explanations or approved narratives.

And yet—I was certain. I couldn't have explained why, not fully, but I was one hundred percent sure this was the right choice. It wasn't belief that drove me forward, it was *instinct.* Something in me knew that becoming Sophia wasn't necessarily about aligning body and mind. It was about claiming a life I wanted to live. It was about *transformation,* not transition. Beautiful women held the key to the life I had read about in books as a child—they carried the map. And beauty was my doorway. It was about becoming the best version of myself, whatever that meant, whatever it cost.

Chapter Thirteen

Tampa nightlife pulsed like no place in the world, even before it became a destination city. Then, its skyline was less defined by towers and more by the incendiary lights burning above its strip clubs. In the 90s and early 2000s, this city wasn't just another stop on the circuit—it was the strip capital of the world. The names carried weight, whispered like incantations: Thee Dollhouse. Mons Venus. 2001 Odyssey. Behind those doors moved women so devastatingly beautiful they seemed less born than designed. Bronze skin glistening under spotlights, bodies honed into weapons of seduction—these were not dancers, they were goddesses, and men offered up their fortunes, their vows, sometimes their very sanity at their feet.

By then, I had crossed over. The awkward boy I once was no longer lingered in mirrors. I was passable, radiant even, and I moved through Tampa's straight clubs with authority. My hair spilled over my shoulders, my body taut and lean, every glance I drew confirming the power I now commanded. Beautiful men came easily, their eyes widening in that moment of recognition—not "what is she?" but "who is she?"

It was an old friend, Lissette, who found me again across a crowded room at Traxx in Ybor City and ushered me into a new phase of nightlife and adventure. We had known each other in those early days at Paradise, when Celeste and Roberto were still shaping my nights, and later at Rene's, where drag shows taught us more than any university ever could. Lissette had transitioned too, and although she was less confident than I, she was real enough to move through straight bars with ease, in command of her own unique sex appeal and spark. She kissed my cheek, conspiratorial. "Afterhours," she whispered with a wink, and I followed without hesitation.

Hammerjax wasn't much from the outside. Inside, it was another world entirely. The air was heady and intoxicating, bodies moving in an instinctive choreography—muscular, shirtless men slicked with sweat, sensuous-looking women gliding between them, beauty everywhere. People touched as if touch had been sanctioned—palms against shoulders, hands

finding hands, strangers laughing like old friends between soaring breakbeats. Alliances formed and dissolved in a single chorus, only to reappear when the song rose again. It was a congregation, a literal religious experience, unbothered by doctrine.

Someone pressed a small white pill into my palm, and without a second thought I let it dissolve into my night. The first wave came on slow, like water warming to a boil, then surged all at once. Heat bloomed in my chest and spread outward, tingling to the very edges of me until every nerve vibrated in time with the music.

The bass wasn't sound anymore—it was heartbeat, bone, breath. Colors sharpened, faces blurred into radiance, and the boundaries that had always kept me separate simply evaporated. The strangers around me weren't strangers at all. Their touch was electric, their laughter familiar. Every glance carried recognition, every smile carried love.

Ecstasy. The name was no exaggeration. It was the most incredible feeling I had ever known, unforgettable because it erased everything else—fear, doubt, the weight of old selves—and replaced it with a single truth: I was fucking *alive*.

I loved everyone, and everyone loved me back. It was communion without scripture, baptism without water. For the first time in my life, the walls I had built around myself collapsed in a rush of light and sound, and I felt the simple, impossible joy of being wholly in the moment.

And then the crowd shifted, and she appeared.

To this day, I can say without hesitation: She was the most beautiful human being I had ever laid eyes on. The ecstasy may have sharpened the edges, made her glow otherworldly, but even memory—sober, sober as stone—cannot diminish her. She remains the standard by which I measure beauty.

Her eyes were almond-shaped and hazel, naturally lifted in a feline sweep, framed by lashes so dense they looked painted. Her cheekbones cut clean and perfect, lips full without softness wasted, a face designed to disarm. Her body was sculpted, tight and muscular, yet completely feminine—breasts high and firm, every movement a study in proportion and control. She didn't walk through the crowd, she moved like a serpent—fluid, deliberate—as if invisible threads pulled the room open before her. Men and women alike turned, and the energy shifted with her stride.

Everyone seemed to know her, or wanted to. Men floated after her like disciples. But she carried herself as though none of it mattered, fully aware

of her power, fully in possession of it. She didn't just own the room. She was gravity itself, the atmosphere around her an instrument of her force.

I was transfixed, pinned where I stood. She was utterly transcendent, my fully formed fantasy sprung to succulent life, a glimpse of everything I wanted to become.

And then her eyes found mine. The crowd blurred, the music dimmed, and for a moment it was just the two of us, tethered by something neither of us could name. The ecstasy coursing through me only magnified it, but even without it I would have sworn that time itself had stopped. She didn't look *through* me the way so many did—she looked *into* me, and held there.

Lissette slipped to my side, grinning as though she'd been waiting for this exact collision. "Come," she said, tugging me forward. "You need to meet her."

We closed the distance, and when Lissette spoke our names, it sounded ceremonial. "Sheena, this is Sophia."

Sheena repeated it slowly, savoring it. "Soooophia..." The way she said it curled through me like smoke, low and intimate. Our eyes locked, the floor shifted beneath me, and for an instant everything else ceased to exist.

She leaned close, her voice a whisper against my ear that was both invitation and command. "Dance with me, Sophia."

And I did.

She took me by the hand and pulled me into the crush of bodies, the ecstasy surging through and between us in waves. The crowd seemed to open just enough for her, as if even the music bent to make space. Eyes followed us. Everyone was watching.

On the dance floor she became something else—less woman than apparition, more vision than flesh. The way her hands slid across her body was slow, deliberate, hypnotic. Each movement seemed calculated to remind the room of her power, but at the same time it was effortless, as if the rhythm itself was pouring out of her veins.

This girl was fucking beautiful. And she knew it. And I knew it. And she knew that everyone else knew it too. It wasn't vanity—it was fact, undeniable, carved into her every gesture.

Dancing with her felt like stepping into a current too strong to resist. I wasn't leading, I wasn't following—I was being carried, absorbed, undone by the gravity of her.

Two boys moved toward us then—their shoulders broad and glistening with sweat, their faces carved in Viking-like symmetry, impossibly

golden and strong. They were drawn in, helpless, mesmerized not just by her but by the spectacle we had created together.

They slipped into our rhythm without a word, bodies folding into the current until the four of us were moving as one. Heat radiated in waves—one of them pressing in close behind me, the other circling to the front, their chests heaving, their hands tentative, reverent.

Sheena danced just beyond their reach, detached, her focus pinned on me. The men might have been beautiful, but to her they were invisible—mere background to the charge running between us. She lifted her hand, found mine, and with effortless authority drew me away from the floor.

The crowd seemed to close behind us, the beat pounding on as if nothing had changed, but for me everything had. Her grip was firm, deliberate, and I followed, carried off the dance floor as though chosen, claimed.

Chapter Fourteen

The door Sheena opened didn't close behind her. Through her, Lissette, and a host of other friends, I was pulled into something vast and intoxicating—the Florida rave scene of the 1990s.

It was a world of open-air festivals and cavernous warehouses that throbbed until dawn, where basslines from Rabbit in the Moon, Icey, Kimball Collins, Huda Hudia, and Dave Seaman beat against your chest like a second heartbeat. Every night was an eruption of sound and color.

The circuit had a name—the Bermuda Triangle. Tampa, Orlando, Miami. Clubs that became legend: The Fantasy Ranch, Ozone, Firestone, OZ, Space, The Edge. They were cathedrals of light and heat, and inside them, reality bent until anything seemed possible.

And at the center of my initiation was Tish.

Tish danced at Thee Dollhouse, but to call her a dancer was like calling fire a candle. She was petite, almost fragile in frame, but her body was an exquisite contradiction—delicate shoulders, a narrow waist, and breasts so impossibly large they had become legend on the Florida strip circuit. Her jet-black China bob framed a porcelain face with lips like a painted doll, but her eyes gave her away—sharp, knowing, fearless. She was dazzling and dangerous all at once, like something dreamt up on a night too wild to remember.

From the first moment she saw me, she didn't flinch. She loved my *otherness*, adored it, called me "art in motion." To her, I wasn't strange—I was a vision, otherworldly, the embodiment of the dreamscape everyone else was chasing. And I was equally captivated. Tish was fearless, brimming with audacity, and when she looked at me, I saw both an ally and a co-conspirator. Our friendship sparked instantly, electric and unbreakable.

Through Tish, I was folded into her circle of dancers and girlfriends. They became my shield, wrapping me in their beauty and bravado. When

the men who inhabited their world—the dealers, promoters, hangers-on—looked at me with suspicion, the girls made their stance clear: if I wasn't welcome, neither were they. That loyalty carried weight. Respect followed.

At first the men kept their distance. Their eyes lingered too long, their whispers sharp and uncertain. They weren't just party boys—they were the gatekeepers of the scene, the ones with the endless supply of ecstasy and cocaine, the ones who decided who belonged and who didn't. But the drugs they pushed were the very thing that undid them. On ecstasy, their minds opened, their suspicions dissolved, their inhibitions fell away. My beauty disarmed them, my presence intoxicated them. What began as wary tolerance shifted into fascination, then into admiration.

The dealers began offering me their product freely, not as payment but as tribute—for my company, for the privilege of being seen with us. With Tish at my side and a tribe of beautiful, muscular boys surrounding us like a royal guard, we hit every rave, every concert, every house party happening within a three hundred mile radius. We weren't just in the scene—we were the scene.

It was then I realized the truth: my beauty and sex appeal, though still being refined, were nearly fully formed. And in this world, they were currency. They opened every door, bought every drug, and elevated me from outsider to insider, from curiosity to cherished member of the tribe.

I danced through endless nights and days with the movers and the shakers, the dealers and the dreamers. I was in the warehouses where thousands pulsed as one organism, and in the living rooms where legendary DJs spun for a dozen of us until the sun burned through the blinds. Those nights stretched into days and those days folded into memories I will never forget. I wasn't just a witness—I was one of the beautiful creatures people still whisper about, a symbol of everything fleeting and fearless that defined the era.

I was part of the legend. Protected, adored, desired. A luminous thread woven into the fabric of something that felt like mythology in the making.

Chapter Fifteen

Keith was only seventeen when we met, but you'd never know it by the way he moved. Swagger clung to him like cologne, sharp and intoxicating. Puerto Rican and Italian, Brooklyn born, he had the kind of city grit that made him seem older than his years—older, but with a boyish innocence not yet compromised. His body knew rhythm like it was born in his bones. Every sway of his hips, every flick of his head caught the light, daring the room to keep up with him.

I noticed him first on the edge of the crowd, a skintight wife-beater damp with sweat, a gold chain catching the strobe. He moved through the other ravers with a confidence that was part predator, part prince. When his eyes met mine, something in me gave way.

We didn't need words. We let the beat do the talking. He pulled me in, and the crowd seemed to fold around us, a pocket of air where only we existed. Tish slipped tabs of ecstasy into our palms, and we swallowed without hesitation, like it was communion.

The night became a blur of dance, touch, sensation—hands brushing, lips grazing, skin lit by the neon flashing all around us. Time didn't pass; it dissolved. Hours later, we were outside, sprawled in the dew-wet grass, watching the sun burn its way up from the horizon. His arm was around me, my cheek pressed against his chest.

We kissed then—slow at first, then deeper, hungrier, like we had been waiting too long for that single moment. His mouth tasted of weed and sugar, of night still lingering on his tongue.

When he finally pulled back, his eyes searched mine. "Is it true?" he asked softly, almost as if afraid of breaking the spell.

I didn't flinch. There was no point in pretending. I told him the truth—the truth people whispered, the rumor that followed me around like a shadow.

He looked at me for a long time. His gaze drifted down, studying my hands, smaller and more delicate than his. He brought them to his lips,

kissing the knuckles softly. His fingers slipped into my hair, tugging ever so lightly but playfully as if to reassure himself it was real, not some wig or costume.

Then he stared into my face—not inspecting, not weighing or judging, but marveling, like he was seeing something rare.

"I don't care," he said finally, voice steady. "I want you."

The world stilled. The music, the sunrise, the ache in my chest—all of it fused into that single, irrevocable moment.

We lay there until the sun burned fully into the sky, the damp grass cooling beneath us, the high from the ecstasy finally fading. He held my hand tight, like letting go might wake him from a dream, steal this perfect feeling.

After that, we were inseparable. Days blurred into nights, nights into days. We rode the currents of ecstasy and youth, chasing each other through clubs, house parties, and the back alleys of Ybor City. We slept tangled together in apartments that weren't ours, in cars parked beneath buzzing streetlamps, in the humid dark of borrowed rooms.

He called me mi reina when he was high, his queen. I laughed at the sweetness of it, but I let him call me that. He carried himself like a boy who already knew too much of the world, but with me he was soft, unguarded. We built a kingdom out of endless nights and stolen mornings, out of sweat, lovemaking, and the kind of heady devotion that belongs only to first love.

For a while, it felt like enough—like maybe this beautiful boy, this perfect love, could shield me from the shadows always creeping closer.

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But nothing lasts forever. Keith began talking about New York again, about going back to Brooklyn, to the streets and friends that had shaped him. He loved me, but he belonged there, and deep down I knew it. The thought of losing him pressed on me like a bruise I couldn't stop touching.

As the prospect of our ending drew closer, I started slipping back into the nights I had briefly abandoned for him. The clubs, the warehouses, the parties that promised distraction if not solace. I chased the music harder, swallowed more pills, tried to drown the fear of being left behind.

One humid night, we found ourselves at a house party in South Tampa, the air thick with the scent of weed and techno shaking the walls. People lounged across couches, bodies tangled on the floor, laughter rising

in bursts that felt just a little too manic. Keith sat beside me, his arm slung loosely over my shoulders, and for a moment it almost felt like before—before the thought of him leaving had begun to hollow me out.

A ripple of energy moved through the crowd. Someone announced excitedly, "He's here!" The drugs had worn thin, and we were all waiting for the delivery.

The door opened, and he walked in.

He wasn't just another party boy with a pocket full of pills or coke. He carried himself with a charisma that drew people in like moths to a flame. He was beautiful in a way that defied type, openly bisexual and unashamed of it, with a magnetism so raw that even straight men sometimes found themselves disarmed by him.

I didn't know him, didn't even know his name, but our eyes met for the briefest second, and it was like a jolt straight through me. Keith was still at my side, his warmth familiar, his hand heavy on my shoulder. But across the room, something charged and undeniable passed between me and this stranger, a recognition neither of us could disguise.

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I excused myself and slipped down the narrow hallway to the bathroom. The mirror above the sink was cracked in the corner, its surface clouded from years of humidity, but it was enough. I checked my lipstick, smoothed my hair, tried to steady myself.

Then the door opened behind me.

He leaned against the frame, casual but deliberate, and for a moment my pulse jumped. I thought of Keith out in the living room, of what this might look like if he noticed. The air seemed to thicken.

"Don't worry," he said, his voice low, smooth. "You're beautiful. You want a line?"

Before I could answer, he closed the door softly and stepped past me. From his pocket he drew out a folded baggie, shaking pale powder onto the counter with practiced ease. The sound of it, the sight of it, was hypnotic—tiny crystalline mountains under the yellow bathroom light.

He cut them quickly, neat gleaming rows, then bent to take the first one himself. Straightening, he rolled a dollar bill and handed it to me without ceremony. He didn't reach for me, didn't leer or crowd me. He just

waited, watching with those eyes that had already unsettled something deep inside me.

The powder burned cold and sharp as it rushed through me, the bathroom tilting for a moment before everything snapped into focus. I straightened, exhaling, and found him watching me.

It wasn't a hard stare, not predatory, but something quieter. Curious. Intrigued. His gaze lingered too long, long enough to make my skin hum. We didn't speak, but we smiled. The silence between us was its own language.

Then, as quickly as he'd appeared, he pocketed the baggie and stood. He leaned close, the faint scent of cologne clinging to him, and brushed a kiss against my cheek.

"You're a very sexy girl," he murmured.

When he opened the door, Keith was standing there. The two of them sized each other up in silence before he finally nodded toward me.

"This your girl?"

Keith, all machismo and Brooklyn confidence, didn't hesitate. "Yeah."

"Lucky guy," he said evenly. As he slipped past, he gave Keith's shoulder a quick squeeze—firm, almost friendly, a gesture that said *I'm not here to steal your girl, it's all good*.

I followed him with my eyes as he threaded through the hallway and back into the thrum of the party. A minute later, I caught sight of him again in the living room, pausing to say something to the host. His body angled just so, the silver chain at his throat catching the dim light. Then he looked up, and our eyes locked across the chaos.

He smiled—faint, knowing—and with a turn, he walked out the door.

Even then, something inside me stirred, a quiet certainty. It felt almost like déjà vu, that first meeting—something so familiar about him. But it wasn't my past he belonged to. It was my future, in ways that would change and shape me, and hurt forever.

Chapter Sixteen

Keith was gone. Back to Brooklyn, back to whatever life waited for him in the city that had shaped his swagger and swallowed his youth. We never said it out loud, but we both knew it was for the best. Love like that, intense and unsustainable, burns itself out if you hold it too long. I let him go without protest, watching his silhouette fade at the airport, the final embrace bending around us like a mirage. For days afterward, I still felt the ghost of his hand in mine, but I knew better than to chase ghosts.

Tish's apartment on Davis Islands felt cavernous without her. She was off dancing in Myrtle Beach, later Vegas, her bikinis and platform heels packed in trunks, her laugh carried to other cities. In her absence, I lived like a guest in someone else's life—curling up on her enormous bed, raiding her closet for clothes to wear, staring out at the water when the silence pressed too hard. She called often, her voice husky over the long-distance line, insisting I keep busy, keep dancing, keep hustling. "Bridge bars," she told me. "Bikini gigs. Head over to Clearwater where nobody knows you. Make your money, girl, and when you've got enough, we'll buy those tits and hit the road together."

I listened. I danced in small bikini bars in seedier parts of Tampa and across the Howard Frankland where I was less inclined to be recognized. Even with small breasts, I was a big fish in a small pond—sexier and more polished than the girls in those places who were barely getting by. I smiled for men whose eyes never made it past my face. Every dollar tucked into my hand wasn't just money—it was a brick in the foundation of the woman I was building.

One humid night at Hyde Park Café, I spotted Sheena holding court at the bar, her laugh sharp enough to cut through the thrum of house music. She was with my old friend Hector, her beauty still devastating and turning heads. I slipped into their circle, the three of us leaning into the bar's sticky counter, drinks sweating between our hands.

Hector leaned close, voice pitched low so only I could hear. "Want to ride with me? I gotta stop by a friend's place, pick up a little something." He tapped his nose lightly, a grin tugging at his mouth.

Sheena rolled her eyes, waving him off with her glass. "I'm staying right here," she said.

I agreed, more out of boredom than intent. We stepped out into the muggy Florida night, the bass from inside still pulsing in my head as we climbed into his car. He drove us across town, down winding streets that grew quieter with each turn, until we were in front of a small but beautifully appointed bungalow on the Hillsborough River.

I'd been on plenty of midnight runs before, but something about this stop felt different. The house glowed warm against the water, light spilling from its windows in careful, deliberate arrangements.

Hector killed the engine, and for a moment we just sat, cicadas buzzing in the trees, the river lapping gently against the seawall. Then a figure stepped onto the patio, the glow from inside catching the lines of his suit, the sharpness of his jaw. He moved with unhurried confidence.

He wasn't tall, but stature hardly mattered. He radiated authority, an old-world kind of presence that made his every move feel intentional. I guessed him to be in his fifties, though he may have been older. Dark hair brushed with gray at the temples framed a face that was still handsome, but it was his eyes—those dazzling, impossible green eyes—that locked you in place.

He walked straight to the car. Without a word, he pulled an 8-ball of cocaine from his pocket and tossed it onto Hector's lap as though it were pocket change. Then he shifted, resting one hand casually on the doorframe, and stared directly at me.

He didn't look away. He just stood there, studying me with a steady intensity that made the night air feel hotter, heavier. My hair was pulled back into a slick bun, my face bare to the world.

A slow smile tugged at his mouth. "What a face," he said, his voice low and sure, as if it were simply fact. "Beautiful."

The words hung between us, heavy as the humid night. He slapped the car lightly, the sound sharp in the stillness. "You kids have fun," he said. Then he turned and walked back toward the house, unhurried, the weight of him still filling the space he'd left behind.

I exhaled, not realizing I'd been holding my breath. "Who was that?" I asked, my voice low, almost apprehensively.

Hector's grin was quick, but there was something tight in it, too. "That," he said, putting the car in gear, "was Andrew Marcello."

I stared out the windshield, replaying the green fire of his eyes, the way his gaze had held me pinned in place. "And who exactly is Andrew Marcello?"

Hector chuckled, but it wasn't his usual easy laugh. "Let's just say he's... connected. Old-school. A man you don't cross." He tapped the 8-ball resting in his lap, then shot me a sideways glance. "And if he noticed you, that means something."

I felt heat rise in my chest, though whether from excitement or fear, I couldn't be sure. "He noticed me," I said softly, almost to myself.

"Yeah," Hector muttered, pulling onto the dark street. "Trust me, girl—he noticed you."

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A few nights later I was with Hector when his phone rang. He glanced at the screen, muttered "Marcello" under his breath, and answered quickly.

I sat beside him on the couch, pretending not to listen, though every word seemed to slice through the air.

"Hey, Andrew," Hector said. "Tonight? Sure... yeah, I can come by." He hesitated, his knee bouncing. "Bring her?" His eyes darted toward me, then away. "Listen, there's something you should know about Sophia..."

My stomach knotted. He told him—told him everything in the blunt, streetwise way Hector always did. I wanted to look away, to block out the sound, but I couldn't.

On the other end there was silence. Heavy, suffocating silence. I could hear it even without the speaker on—the kind that makes goosebumps crawl across your skin. Hector swallowed hard, waiting.

Then Andrew's voice came, low and certain, the finality of it chilling and thrilling all at once. "Fuck it. Bring her."

Chapter Seventeen

My reintroduction to Andrew was exactly what I imagined. He was charming. He was attentive. There were a few people around, and he wasn't overly flirtatious, but at the end of the night he pressed his phone number into my hand along with a gram of coke. He leaned in, his green eyes locking on mine, and whispered, "Call me."

I did. And a few days later I was at his house and he was making me dinner—just the two of us. The bungalow was quiet that night, the river sliding past in the dark beyond the windows. The table was set with heavy plates and polished silver, a single candle flickering between us. The food was delicious—roasted chicken, fettuccini, vegetables glistening with olive oil, bread warm from the oven.

It felt intimate in a way that filled me with nostalgia. It reminded me of childhood, before my stepfather. It reminded me of family.

Andrew asked questions as if he had all the time in the world, letting silences stretch so long I felt compelled to answer. Not the shallow things men usually wanted, but the truths that cut deeper. He leaned forward when I told him about my father, still in prison after all these years. He didn't interrupt. He studied me, his gaze steady, absorbing every word.

When I admitted how I hustled to make money, still living at home when I wasn't crashing on couches with friends, I felt tears sting my eyes. I tried to blink them back, but he noticed. He reached across the table and took my hand, his grip firm yet gentle, as though grounding me.

"I don't know what the fuck I'm doing with someone like you... but I've never wanted anyone more." He looked at me for what seemed like an eternity. "You won't have to hustle," he said, his voice low, certain. "I'll take care of you. I'll protect you."

Something in me pulled taut in a way I hadn't felt before. His words weren't wrapped in bravado or dripping with desire—they carried weight and went straight to the quiet, hidden places inside me.

I didn't realize it at the time, but my attraction to Andrew wasn't born out of lust. It came from a place of longing. He reminded me of my father—it wasn't the way he looked. It was the way he lived. Outside. Like my dad. Like me. He was someone who set the rules instead of being ruled. His offer of security and protection felt both foreign and strangely familiar, like hearing a childhood story you thought you'd forgotten.

Chapter Eighteen

My life until then had been a blur of late nights and hustling, couches and borrowed beds, the money I made from bikini dancing a currency I spent carefully to keep afloat. And suddenly, I was here—carrying my things through the doorway of a man who promised I'd never have to hustle again.

The bungalow smelled clean, like lemons and sea salt. Andrew took my bag from my shoulder like it weighed nothing, setting it down in the bedroom that was now ours. The closet was bigger than any room I'd ever lived in. The bed, enormous and dressed in crisp white sheets, looked like it belonged in a magazine.

It felt unreal, like I'd stepped into someone else's life. He poured me a glass of wine, touched my back lightly as he led me through the house, pointing out the little things he'd chosen himself—the heavy silver frames on the mantel, the old-world clock that chimed softly every hour, the way the windows opened wide to the river.

"Relax," he told me, his voice calm but commanding. "This is your home now. You don't have to prove anything here."

I stood in that house with its wide windows and gleaming floors, wondering what it was going to be like, this life I was choosing, with this man I barely knew—but who made me feel safe.

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My world shifted overnight. I had gone from gay bars and strip clubs, from raves and side gigs, to Andrew's world—where deals were whispered over crystal glasses in dim cocktail lounges, where the waiters in Bern's, Armani's, and Donatello's knew his name before he spoke it.

The men around him were older, Italian, dangerous. They didn't leer at me the way others had. They treated me like I belonged at the table, like I was part of something. My glass was never empty, and someone always

made sure I had enough cocaine to powder my nose before I stepped back into the glow of the dining room lights.

At Donatello's one evening, Andrew fell quiet mid-sentence. His gaze fixed on a corner table, where an older man, flanked by family, sat with quiet elegance. Without a word, he rose and smoothed his jacket, crossing the room to greet him.

Nick Scaglione.

The name detonated inside me, a scattering of memory and childhood. A relic of Tampa's old order, still seated like a sovereign among men who pretended to be the very thing he was. Nick was my father's oldest friend, bound to him through decades of shared work secrets and long stretches of separation. Prison did not loosen that bond; loyalty only deepened. And when my father was finally released, it was Nick's family who sustained him, offering both financial support and fidelity.

Andrew clasped his hand with respect, bowing his head slightly in greeting. Around him, the younger men kept their silence, watchful as shadows, while the waiters eased their steps as though the air itself were heavier near his table.

The last time I'd seen him I was thirteen, maybe fourteen. A lanky boy ushered into the University Park Restaurant, a meeting my father arranged to be sure I was okay. Nick was younger then, the servers hyper attentive, a heaping plate of garlic and olive oil pasta shared between us. To me, he was just Uncle Nick, a man who popped into my life from time to time, but the man my father swore would always look out for me on the outside. I was too young to understand the history he carried, the legendary shadow of a man who had survived longer than most by living by the old rules.

I waited for his eyes to catch mine, to flicker with even a spark of recognition. But when they did, they slid past without pause. To him, I was just another beautiful girl on Andrew's arm. The boy he'd once known—the child he blessed—was gone, and this woman before him was a stranger.

It was final. The ghost of who I had been dissolved in that moment of non-recognition. I returned to Andrew's world and let it claim me in full.

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I was no longer in survival mode. Andrew bought me diamonds, clothes, anything I wanted.

He paid for my surgeries too—first my breasts, then subtle refinements to my face. Each time, he framed it not as fixing me, but as revealing what he already saw. While I healed, he fussed over me like I was something delicate and rare, making sure I had everything I needed. I played the dutiful kept woman, drifting between the bed and my plastic surgeon's office as weeks blurred into months—the smell of antiseptic clinging to my skin, the tug of tape across fresh incisions, bruises blooming and fading like strange flowers until I was remade again.

For a year I lived in that rhythm—luxury, protection, devotion. Andrew made sure my mother and sister were invited for dinner, encouraging me to reconnect with them, as though he wanted to stitch me back into a family I was leaving behind.

But under the quiet glow of chandeliers and the weight of the love and devotion, something inside of me began to suffocate.

At night, while Andrew slept, I would stand at the wide windows, staring out at the river as it slid past in the dark. I would watch—sometimes with cocaine running through me and a glass of champagne in my hand. The water moved endlessly forward, never looking back, and I felt the same restless pull rising inside me, alone with the silence and the sound of the current.

Ascension

Chapter Nineteen

Andrew thought he had given me everything—safety, devotion, a beautiful home. And I was grateful. I loved him in a way. But it wasn't the kind of love that keeps you tethered. It was gratitude, comfort, the relief of no longer hustling to survive. It was not passion.

In his arms, my heart never raced. His world was often heavy with silence, and at twenty-three, silence felt like death. I had become everything I once dreamed of—beautiful, sexy, elegant, impossible to ignore. Men turned their heads when I walked into a room. I had it made in Tampa, but I wanted more.

Andrew didn't understand that the very things he gave me—jewelry, diamonds, the sheen of respectability—were not anchors but tools. Each bracelet, each necklace was currency I could cash in for freedom. With this body, this beauty, I could go far.

I was never built to be kept or caged. I was restless, already imagining the fire of other men's eyes, the electricity of nights that began in one city and ended in another. Tampa was conquered. The world was waiting.

I didn't leave with an argument. There was no scene, no slammed doors or raised voices. That wasn't my way, and it wasn't his. That wasn't why I left. I left because something in me wanted to, needed to.

One morning, while Andrew was out, I stood in the closet he had filled for me. Rows of dresses, shoes lined up like soldiers, boxes from Cartier and Louis Vuitton stacked neatly on the shelves.

I looked around the room one last time—the gleaming floorboards, the white sheets pulled tight across the bed, the faint smell of lemon and sea salt that clung to the house. It was beautiful. It was safe. But it was not mine.

I didn't write a note. I didn't explain. We talked briefly. For now, the chapter with Andrew—this chapter, anyway—was complete. When I closed the door behind me, it was with the same calm certainty I had when I first walked into his life. Only now, I was walking out of it.

I took everything to my mother's house and dropped it off in my old bedroom, the space crowded with long-forgotten pieces of an old life, and the remnants of a new one.

By the end of the week, I was back on stage, the heat of a Tampa strip club washing over me in hot pink and blue light. The money came fast, the stares faster. Some men recognized me, but most respected my privacy. They watched me from the edge of the stage, fascinated, as I moved the way Sheena and Tish had taught me—hypnotic, deliberate, every gesture a promise I never had to keep. Others tipped just to talk, drawn in by something they couldn't quite name, a pull I exerted without even trying.

I was no longer hustling out of desperation. Now I danced because I could, because it was profitable, because the power of my body translated into cold, hard cash.

Back in the dressing room, the air smelled of hairspray and sweat, perfume and baby powder. Girls traded lashes and lipstick, tugged at their bikinis, lit cigarettes with shaking hands. I sat at the mirror, sober, thumbing through a stack of magazines someone had left behind.

Nightmoves. The pages were glossy, cluttered with club ads and escort listings, snapshots of girls who looked both glamorous and disposable. I skimmed without much thought—until the words stopped me cold.

Beautiful pre-op transsexual wanted for modeling and escort work. Upscale service provides client referrals. $1000 a week min. Modeling experience not required. Breast implants a plus.

I read it once, twice, again, my eyes chasing the lines as if they might change. The room around me faded—the chatter, the smoke, the hiss of a curling iron—until it was just me and those words. My pulse quickened.

It felt like the ad had been written for me, slipped into those pages on purpose, waiting for the exact moment I'd find it. And here it was: an invitation, a promise, a key to something far bigger than a stage with a brass pole and a floor littered with crumpled bills.

I tore the page out carefully, folding it into my bag like a secret. My hands shook—not with fear, but with anticipation.

When my shift ended, I didn't linger. I slipped out the back door into the humid night. I knew I'd call. The decision was already made.

Chapter Twenty

The number in the ad connected on the first try. A man's voice answered, clipped but polite, as if this was nothing unusual at all. I told him who I was, what I looked like, and what I wanted. To my surprise, it took almost no convincing. Within minutes he said I was exactly what he was looking for. He could arrange a plane ticket if I was able to be in Fort Lauderdale later that week.

"Yes," I said, my voice steady. "I'll be there."

When I hung up, the decision felt final. Clean. My life in Tampa was already fading behind me.

Later that night, I sat with my mother in my old bedroom—the same room where I used to cry, dream, and hope for something more. Since leaving Andrew's and crashing with Tish, I had been using it mostly for storage. I began gathering pieces that I knew would work for this adventure—tight bandage dresses still on their hangers, bodysuits, bikinis, heels with their straps tangled, boxes of jewelry.

My mother watched me quietly, her fingers brushing the bodice of a strapless gown as if it carried the echo of another life. Her eyes grew misty, and I knew she was remembering her own days of glamour, when she and my father ruled the night.

She turned to me.

"I'm not going to judge you," she said softly. "I'm not going to pretend I understand this journey you're on. But I just want you to be careful. And please—call me. Often. I just want to know that you're okay."

I nodded, tucking the gown into my bag. I didn't promise her safety or certainty. Only that I was going.

When I looked up again, she was standing there with her arms open. I crossed the room, and she pulled me in tight. It wasn't quick or polite—it was a long, unspoken embrace, the kind you sink into and don't want to let go of. Whatever dysfunction lived between us, whatever pain we had

endured, the love had always been there, and it was there now, wrapping around me.

"I love you," she whispered.

"I love you too," I said back, my face pressed against her shoulder.

For a moment, it felt like neither of us wanted to release the other. But eventually, I pulled away. My bags were ready. My path was set.

As I passed through the living room, I caught a glimpse of my stepfather, sitting quietly, watching me, his eyes menacing and cold.

When I stepped outside, it was nearly dark. I carried my things to Tish's car, where she was waiting to take me to the airport. Before sliding into the seat, I turned back to look at the house. Memories crowded me—arguments, slammed doors, nights of fear, mornings of hope. All of it pressed in at once.

My mother stood in the doorway, framed by the porch light. And suddenly I saw it with a clarity I'd never had before: the house wasn't just her shelter. It was her prison.

Like my father, she wasn't free. Not really.

The realization struck deep. If I stayed, I risked the same fate—trapped in walls heavy with ghosts, with dreams shrinking into dust. I couldn't let that happen.

I gave her one last wave, then slid into the car.

Tish glanced at me as she started the engine. "Are you ready for this?"

I met her eyes and nodded. "More than ready."

My life here was over. Ahead of me, something entirely new was waiting.

Chapter Twenty-One

It felt exciting. It felt like the unknown unfolding before me, and I was ready for it—maybe even sexually charged by the possibility. This was what I had wanted: a new city, a new chance, a door swinging open into something larger than Tampa could ever offer.

The man who met me at the airport wasn't what I expected. Slight of build, soft-spoken, he seemed almost intimidated the moment he saw me. His handshake was tentative, his eyes nervous. On the ride from the airport, he talked about opportunity, but his voice lacked conviction, like he was trying to convince himself as much as me.

The promise of a thousand dollars a week vanished fast. His phone didn't ring. The so-called business line sat silent, and in the few days I stayed with him, I made less than I had on a single night dancing in Tampa. Disappointment settled in quickly.

I thought about leaving, about taking what little I had and going home. But then he mentioned James—another "agent" in the area, someone with real connections, a busier clientele, an operation that actually worked. He promised an introduction.

That was enough to make me stay.

James had a reputation. Shady, sure, but effective. He was known for finding work quickly, for keeping the girls busy and paid. Most of his business was with women, but when we met, I could see immediately that he was interested in me for more than just business. He made no bones about it. His eyes lingered, his voice dropped when he spoke to me.

"Ever been to Boston?" he asked one night, leaning back like a lightbulb had just gone off in his head. "I've got a house there. You could work, make more money than you'll ever see in Florida."

I answered quickly. "Let's make money here first. Then we'll talk about Boston."

James and I fell into a rhythm almost immediately. He took forty percent off the top, but in exchange I had his house in Lauderdale-by-the-Sea, his contacts, and the promise of calls every day. It wasn't charity and it wasn't romance. It was business. And it worked.

This was my initiation into the world of sex for sale. I wasn't conflicted. Not for a second. For the first time, I felt the exchange of desire and power in its rawest form—and I liked it. Men wanted me, paid for me, and I walked away stronger each time. It's an easy game to play in the beginning. It changes as you go.

Some of the men were forgettable, nothing more than wallets with faces. But others... I was drawn to. I let myself enjoy them, let myself take the heat they gave off and turn it into my own. That was the difference. I wasn't being used. I was using the situation, shaping it, making it mine.

At that time, a girl like me was rare—nearly impossible to find. Beautiful and sexy, but petite enough, polished enough, not to intimidate a straight man who was looking for something different.

And the money—it came fast. Thick stacks, cash in hand, every day. More than I had ever made dancing, more than I had imagined possible. I learned quickly how easy it was to turn a body into an ATM, how every hour could be measured in bills and every night could end with a purse heavy enough to change my life.

Chapter Twenty-Two

James didn't last long in my life. Just as quickly as he appeared, he was gone. But before he disappeared, he sent me north.

Boston. His house there wasn't much, just a stopover where he kept two other girls working steady. Real women. They knew the drill, knew the regulars, and they didn't much care for me. I was competition, sitting there on the couch while their clients started looking at me instead of them.

One night it happened. A man came in, a regular of one of the women. He saw me, sitting quiet, and asked for me. She tried to warn him. "She's trans," she said, sharp, like she was doing him a favor.

He didn't blink. "Her," he said, pointing at me.

His name was Riley, and it's ironic now that one of James's best clients would lead me into the clutches of a much more polished but sinister "agent." Our time together was quick—over in just a few minutes—but while he was dressing, I could feel him studying me in a way other clients didn't. Before he left, he handed me a card.

"You don't belong here," he told me, his voice calm, certain. "Call this man. He's first class all the way."

I slipped the card into my purse, weighing the implications of hooking up with another agent. James was temporary, I knew that. I was learning fast, and I was getting tired of the cut he was taking.

The women in Boston saw me as competition. James saw me as a paycheck. But this card... it might be a key.

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After a month in Boston, I returned to Tampa exhausted, but the thousands of dollars in cash I carried back with me made it all worth it. I didn't go back to Tish's apartment. Instead, I rented a condo on the beach for a week, a small luxury I could afford now. The sound of the waves outside my window felt like proof that everything I had been chasing was real.

While I was in Tampa, I stopped to see my mother. I left her with bags of groceries and two thousand dollars in cash, slipping it into her hand before she could protest. She didn't look well. Her skin was pale, her eyes clouded. She told me she'd been seeing a doctor, but insisted everything was fine. I didn't push. I didn't want to know.

That night, I pulled the card Riley had given me from my purse and dialed the number.

"Anthony Lavelle," the voice answered. Strong. Measured. Educated. Cold.

"This is Sophia," I said, steady.

He paused just long enough to make me wonder what he was thinking. Then: "I've been expecting your call."

His tone shifted into something practiced, the cadence of a man who had delivered these words many times before.

"I run an agency," he said. "It caters to men with different persuasions. My clients are wealthy. They expect the best—and absolute discretion."

He paused. "Some are even famous."

The line went quiet. I sat there, phone pressed to my ear, the waves breaking just outside my window, waiting.

"Do you know how to be discreet?" he asked finally. His voice was sharper now, stripped of polish. "Because in my business, I don't care how beautiful you are, how special you are. If you can't be discreet, I can't use you."

I didn't hesitate. "I can be discreet."

Chapter Twenty-Three

A few days later I was back on a plane to South Florida to meet the new man in my life. But this was no romance. It was the best thing I ever did—and maybe, just maybe, the worst mistake I ever made.

My premonition that Anthony Lavelle might be someone to be wary of was completely on point. As time went on, I learned more than I ever wanted to. He was a serial seducer of desperate young girls. A pimp disguised as a businessman.

He lived in a mansion on Harbour Beach, a stunning modern with gleaming glass and expensive art, the Atlantic visible from every room. He drove a Ferrari. He said he had a master's degree from Wharton. And there wasn't a flashy thing about the way he dressed. He screamed expensive. Elegant. Refined. But underneath it all, he was a monster. I just didn't know it then.

What I was still too young and inexperienced to understand was that the dazzling surroundings didn't change who he was—or what he did. In my mind, escorts were girls in the classifieds, waiting in empty apartments for the phone to ring. They weren't businesswomen with platinum AmEx cards and a Porsche in the driveway.

That's where he got me. He shifted my perception without even trying. Two days in that sprawling house, surrounded by beautiful women who seemed happy and carefree, and I was hooked.

On the second day, Anthony pulled me out onto the terrace. The ocean thundered below, but his eyes stayed fixed on mine.

"You are what I've been looking for," he said. "Beautiful women are everywhere, but you—you're different. Special. Possibly the future of my business."

He let the words hang.

"You're not just beautiful. You have class. You're smart. And I can tell—" He leaned in just enough to close the distance. "You're hungry."

I didn't answer. I let the silence work for me, steady, unblinking.

He smiled faintly, as if I'd passed some test.

"Jade is taking you shopping at Bal Harbour," he said. "Nothing but the best. We need to even out a few things—it'll take about a week. Then you're flying to Boston."

Boston. Again. Something went off in my mind. What was this thread between Lauderdale and Boston? Why did everything circle back there? I didn't understand it yet, but I could feel there was a pattern I hadn't unraveled.

I started to protest, but he cut me down with a look so sharp it froze the words in my throat.

"This guy is gold," he said flatly. "Five thousand for two days. He'll take you shopping."

"And what do you get out of it?" I asked.

"I already arranged my payout with the client. You kick back five hundred and keep the rest."

I studied him. "And the clothes today?"

"Gifts," he said smoothly. "I don't expect them back."

Despite my apprehension, my gut told me I was safe—that I could trust him, at least enough to take the chance. Was this the key I had been searching for? The way into the life I had dreamed of as a child?

After lunch, he walked me to the front door. Outside, under the port-cochère, the Ferrari idled with a low, predatory growl. Jade was at the wheel—blonde, impossibly beautiful, a woman who belonged to this world without question.

Anthony handed me a platinum AmEx and kissed me lightly on the cheek. "Buy what you want."

For a fleeting second, as I took the card, I felt a shiver of unreality—like I had stepped onto a stage I wasn't entirely sure I belonged on. Then I slid into the leather seat, and we roared off.

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Jade and I became fast friends.

Tall and lithe, with flowing blonde hair, lush lips, and flawless skin, she moved through the world with an air of confidence that bordered on arrogance. She was elevated in every way, not one detail missed or out of place. I liked her immediately.

We spent thousands of dollars that day, and she didn't bat an eyelash. By the time the spree was over, I had everything a high-class call girl would need—or at least enough to get started.

Exhausted from shopping, Jade suggested South Beach. We slid into a table at The Clevelander, ordered martinis, and as we waited for our drinks, she began schooling me on the rules.

"Don't fall in love. Never lose sight of the objective, which is always money—priority number one. Always look better than your best—better than any girl in the room, especially the ones you're working with. Never wear the same dress with the same client. Always insist on the best: the champagne, the restaurant, the hotel, the limo. Don't settle. Never, ever fly coach. Always listen. Fuck his brains out. And never—" she tapped her martini glass lightly against mine, her smile sharp—"never lose sight of the objective."

I studied Jade carefully. The name suited her. She had a detachment about her that seemed so cool... so jaded. I watched as she discreetly pulled a small bag of cocaine from her purse and did a bump from her perfectly manicured nail right there at the table. I figured she must have been doing this a long time.

"How old are you?" I asked.

"Eighteen," she replied.

Chapter Twenty-Four

So that's how it all started.

Jade showed me the ropes. Anthony arranged a few "test runs" with select regulars—men he trusted to be honest, and discreet. Each paid five hundred dollars for dinner and thirty minutes of private time afterward.

They were asked to rate me—my presentation, personality, table manners, conversation skills—and later, my ability to give head.

It was transactional, clinical even. But for Anthony, this was business. And for me, it was a test—a way to prove I could play the part, hold my own, and deliver exactly what was expected.

These "test runs" were my final initiation into the world of high-class sex work. Once I passed, there would be no going back.

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I still remember the day Anthony told me I was leaving for Boston.

I was lying by the pool with Chasey, a beautiful porn star from L.A. who was visiting for a few days. The sun was sharp, the water still, and everything about the scene felt too perfect to be real.

I was on the phone with my mother. She was worried—I could hear it in her voice—but I assured her everything was fine, that I'd be back in Florida within the week.

Chasey smiled as she listened, sunglasses sliding down her nose. "You're lucky," she said softly, almost to herself. "I haven't talked to my mom in years."

Anthony walked toward us, his stride quick, all business.

"Jade has your plane ticket," he said. "You'll have your own suite at the hotel. Don't fall asleep with him or agree to spend the night in his room. Once the evening and private time are over, go back to your room. Meet him again in the morning for breakfast and shopping, then go about your day. Business as usual."

He paused, watching me closely.

"Hang out for a few days. I'll call if anything changes. Right now, you'll have free time in Boston until Monday."

Anthony's tone was steady, rehearsed—the tempo of a man used to being obeyed.

"He'll give you the money when you arrive," he continued. "Put it in the hotel safe. Don't spend a dime of your own. Look—" He hesitated, just long enough for me to catch it. "He's a gentleman. Been with a couple of the girls. He's a preferred client."

Something in his voice said he didn't quite believe the "gentleman" part, at least not completely.

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Later that night, as Jade helped me pack, I asked her if I should change my name.

"I thought you had," she said.

"No," I replied. "I mean—should I use another name while I'm working?"

"Of course," she said, folding a dress and laying it neatly into the suitcase. "The less these guys know about you, the better."

"What do you think?" I asked.

She paused, her hands resting on the silk fabric. When she looked up, something shifted in her face—her eyes glassy and faraway, carrying a kind of weight I hadn't noticed before. In that moment, she looked older, as if she'd seen too much, lived a dozen lives already.

"Raquel," she said finally.

I turned the name over in my mind, loving the sound of it instantly. It felt strong. Sensual. Cinematic.

"Why Raquel?" I asked.

Jade continued folding my clothes, her gaze fixed on the task, not on me.

"You remind me of a girl I used to know when she first started," she said quietly. "Her name was Raquel."

"What happened to her?"

"Who knows," she murmured, a flicker of sadness crossing her face. Then she closed the suitcase, snapping it shut like the end of a thought.

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The next morning, Jade drove me to the airport.

As I reached for the door handle, she caught my hand. "He's basically a nice guy," she said. "But he's got quirks. Some fetishes. He won't try to hurt you physically, and he's perfectly normal outside the bedroom. Just remember—you make the rules. You don't have to do anything you don't want to do."

She paused, studying me as if trying to measure what I could handle.

"The good thing about Anthony is that he's not some run-of-the-mill pimp. He'll back you up, whatever your limits. He's smart enough to know a healthy, happy girl keeps the money rolling in."

I leaned across the console and hugged her. "Thanks for everything, Jade."

When I stepped out of the car, I turned back for one last look. The morning light caught her face, and again I saw the change, I saw how tired it was—how desperate. Beneath the makeup and the perfect hair, she looked like a girl already fading.

It was the last time I would ever see her alive.

Chapter Twenty-Five

For personal and practical reasons, I've changed the names of certain people who appear in this book.

The decision comes from respect—and discretion—for a few whose company I truly enjoyed. Over the years, some well-known names have shown me affection, kindness, even admiration, and there's no reason to name them publicly here.

I've also changed the name of the man I consider my first real client—a giant shadow among the countless men who came after.

He was an enormously wealthy and influential man, a retired investment banker and high-stakes gambler with deep ties to Boston, New York, Zurich, and Geneva. He had political clout, famous friends, and a black American Express card he used indiscriminately—to buy whatever I told him I needed.

He had access to everything. Including drugs.

We'll call him David.

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David saw one girl a month. He arranged to have her meet him wherever in the world he happened to be at the time.

For three and a half weeks out of every month, David was a loving father—a detached husband who allowed his wife the luxury of living her own life—and a brilliant businessman and gambler, parlaying investments and winnings into a constant stream of wealth.

But one weekend each month, the monster sleeping inside him would stir.

He'd turn off his cell phone and disappear into himself, surrendering completely to a hunger that was both ritual and release—an unbridled, unadulterated lust that stretched the limits of even my vast sexual imagination.

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When I arrived in Boston, a private car was waiting. The driver didn't speak much, and I didn't need him to.

He chauffeured me straight to the Ritz.

As I stepped into the lobby, I could feel eyes on me.

I wore a fitted black Gucci pencil skirt and a white blouse that accentuated every curve without being cheap. Strappy Via Spiga heels clicked against the marble floor with every step. My hair was slicked back into a tight bun, my lips glossed, my nails perfect.

Behind a huge pair of Chanel sunglasses, I took in the scene—crystal chandeliers, polished brass, the faint scent of money and power.

The driver trailed a few steps behind, carrying my two Gucci suitcases.

I looked every inch the star, ready-made to be dropped into a movie already in progress.

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I was shown to a suite with sweeping views of the city.

There was champagne on ice and a note placed neatly on the table:

> *Please meet me in the hotel bar after you settle in. Wear the dress that's on your bed. In the hotel safe, you'll find your money—and a gift.*

An access code was written at the bottom.

I went straight to the safe. Inside was five thousand dollars in fresh, crisp hundred-dollar bills. And something else.

A small, jewel-encrusted pillbox filled with white powder.

I dipped a fingertip, tasted carefully. Coke.

On the bed, a red wrap dress from DVF—sexy, but classy—with a plunging neckline.

In the bathroom, I spread two fat lines across the gleaming granite counter, rolled up one of the hundreds, and inhaled deeply.

I looked at myself in the mirror. I looked amazing.

I felt amazing.

It was showtime.

Chapter Twenty-Six

When I entered the hotel lobby, every head turned.

I didn't know what my guy looked like, so I walked slowly toward the bar, took a seat, and waited. It didn't take long. Every man in the room was watching me, their conversations thinning into silence.

"Hello, beautiful."

The voice came suddenly, low and close to my ear.

I turned, and there he was—one of the most distinguished-looking men I had ever seen. Tall. Elegant. A perfect suit, expertly tailored to his frame. His face was lean and handsome, with high cheekbones and dark, assessing eyes. His hair was short, his jaw clean-shaven, with just the faintest hint of shadow.

When he spoke again, I caught a Boston accent—polished, but with something else beneath it. European, maybe. I couldn't quite place it. I pegged him around forty, though he could have been older.

He kissed me lightly on the cheek. "I'm David."

I made a point of looking him straight in the eyes when I introduced myself. Part of me immediately found him attractive—not in the way I might find someone my own age hot or sexy, but in the way only an older man can be.

He smelled like power, the way other men reek of cologne. It clung to him. Subtle but impossible to ignore.

"Anthony didn't exaggerate when he said you were something special," he said. "I watched you turn every head in the place—and not for the wrong reasons."

He paused, studying me.

"You have a lot of confidence for a girl... a woman of... your nature."

I leaned in and squeezed his hand. "Confidence is inherent, David. It has nothing to do with having a penis. Although it probably helps."

He laughed, the ice breaking instantly. "Shall we?" He held out his hand.

I took it like a lady, and he escorted me through the bar into the restaurant.

Over dinner and two very expensive bottles of wine, we talked. David did most of the talking but revealed very little about himself. I answered his questions thoughtfully but carefully, offering little to no personal detail when he asked where I grew up. I played coy, sexy, using my wit to draw him deeper into the sticky web I was spinning over the heaping tray of paella.

I was playing a part—one that felt all too natural. I should've been an actress, but I guess fate had other plans for me.

When he signaled for the check, I assumed we'd go back to his room together, but it soon became clear he had something else in mind.

"Raquel, do you see that very handsome guy at the bar?"

He nodded toward a man in a tight black sweater and soft leather pants. The guy was extraordinarily good-looking. He raised his bottle of Corona in our direction, the gesture casual but his eyes locked on mine.

"I do," I said.

David's eyes flicked back to me. "I hired him. For you."

Silence. Heavy. Charged.

"He's one of the most famous adult film stars in the world," David continued. "And I brought him here for you. All he wanted was the Gucci ensemble he's wearing—and half an ounce of coke."

I tilted my head, my voice dry. "That's all?"

He smiled. "That's it. Some men want millions, others just powder. But everyone has their price."

"Now," David said, voice even, "I know this wasn't part of our deal. And something tells me you're not the kind of woman who likes surprises without being compensated. The dress you're wearing cost me nearly two grand. You keep it—the dress, the money in the safe, and the little gift—and you fuck that hot young stud while I watch. We'll call it even."

I smiled—tight, deliberate—and let the silence breathe. I counted a slow three in my head. "No."

His brows lifted. "No?"

"No," I repeated, steady. "That wasn't the deal."

He studied me for several seconds, the way a gambler studies the table before the turn. "He's very handsome, Raquel. And I assure you he's very well endowed. I hear girls like you enjoy that."

Jade's voice flickered through my mind: *You make the rules.* I held his gaze and didn't blink.

For a heartbeat, I saw it—David's carefully cultivated mask was slipping. Something colder moved underneath.

"I'll gladly get into bed with him," I said finally, my voice even, controlled. "Because honestly—who wouldn't? But I want additional compensation."

He laughed aloud. "Additional compensation? For fucking a man you'd be with for free under any other circumstances?"

"That's correct," I replied smoothly. "I want additional compensation for fucking a man I'd fuck for free under any other circumstances."

He studied me, expression unreadable. A full minute passed before he finally spoke.

"How much?"

"A thousand dollars," I said, "and no anal."

"Done," he replied coldly. "Let's go."

He paid the check, and I followed him over to the bar to meet the man I'd be living out this fantasy with.

"Raquel," David said, "this is Bo."

Bo was even more gorgeous up close. Rugged. Masculine. I couldn't wait to get my hands on him.

"I'm going to give you two a few minutes to get personally acquainted," David said, sliding a key across the bar. "Talk about what a freak I am and all that good stuff. I'll meet you in my room in fifteen minutes."

He fixed me with a cold, deliberate stare. "Be naked when I get there."

Bo and I walked like obedient hookers toward the elevators. He placed his hand at the small of my back—firm, possessive. His voice was low, confident.

"Don't worry, baby. This is going to be easy for both of us. I've never been with a girl like you before, but you're beautiful, and this'll be fun. I promise, I'll treat you right. I've done some crazy shit with him, but nothing we can't handle."

He could feel me shaking.

When the elevator doors closed, he turned to me and kissed me—softly, but with intent.

"Don't be scared," he said. "I'm not going to hurt you."

"What makes you think I'm scared?" I asked.

"I can feel you shaking," he replied. "David says this is your first real call."

I reached down and placed my hand on his crotch. I could feel his cock start to strain against the leather.

As the elevator slowed to our floor, I looked him straight in the eyes. "Bo, I'm not shaking because I'm scared. I'm shaking because I can't wait to suck your cock until your head's spinning."

He smiled, squeezing my hand before leading me down the hall toward the suite.

"Good," he said. "Then let's get this done."

Chapter Twenty-Seven

When it was over—after David had his fill and blew his load countless times—Bo and I left him sprawled across the bed, spent and snoring quietly. We slipped into the bathroom and turned on the shower.

"That was easier than I thought," Bo said as we stepped under the spray.

The water ran warm, washing everything away—his cologne, the sweat, the last traces of performance. I didn't feel cheap. I didn't feel broken or dirty. I certainly didn't feel like a victim. I felt nothing at all, and somehow that made it seem okay.

When we got out, Bo took a towel and began drying my back, slow and careful.

"I like you," he said. "I want to finish what we started. Just the two of us. Let's get high and fuck all night."

The way he looked in the soft light of that bathroom was heavenly—rippling muscles, tattoos across his chest and arms back when ink still meant something, and that perfect cock, so big it hung halfway down his leg even soft. His smile, that face—it was everything.

"Why not?" I said.

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We went back to my room. We snorted coke all night and fucked over and over again.

He'd never been with a transsexual before, and every time the city lights caught my body, he'd stare at my cock—transfixed, curious, almost reverent. His touch was tender, gentle, but there were moments when he could feel my desire rising, and he'd respond with force, as if he knew I wanted him to be rougher, harder.

With David, it was work for both us. Now, it was pure, animal lust.

We kissed like we meant it. When he rolled on a condom, gripped my hips, and flipped me onto all fours, I didn't protest. I wanted him.

He fucked me for over an hour.

When it was over, I wasn't even high anymore. I was empty, spent, floating.

He looked at me then, eyes soft, hand against my face, and laughed—a light, sweet sound. For a moment, I saw the boy behind the man, the one who still believed in something pure.

"Man," he said, "that was wild."

I fell asleep in his arms.

When I woke up the next morning, he was gone. He'd left a note with an L.A. number, asking me to stay in touch.

I lay there in the quiet, replaying the night in my mind. Every touch, every thrust, every whispered breath between us. My body stirred again, heat pooling low as if memory alone could bring him back. I knew I'd call him. I knew I would see him again. For a moment, I let myself imagine a future—nights stretched out before us, time unraveling in pleasure and promise. The first night we shared was the beginning of a trap neither of us could escape. There would be other nights ahead that belonged just to us, but it was the nights with David—and the sick fantasies we were destined to play out for him—that would both break us and bind us, forever.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Newbury Street gleamed that morning, a parade of glass and gloss beneath a pale Boston sky. David walked a half-step ahead of me, the picture of confidence, cufflinks catching the light, coat tailored within an inch of arrogance. Inside Versace, he gestured toward a rack of silk and leather as if money were air. I let him. Six thousand dollars later, my arms were heavy with garments I couldn't refuse.

David carried an air of privilege. The clerks' expressions at every boutique changed when we entered, subtle but reverent, and I understood.

We moved from boutique to boutique—Gucci, Cartier, Chanel—the security guard shutting the door behind us like a vault. He didn't blink when I paused over a bag priced at four thousand. "Get it," he said, and the words were soft, almost tender, as if indulgence itself were a kind of affection.

Over lunch, he was the man everyone else saw: attentive, amused, easy with charm. He ordered wine without glancing at the list, folded my napkin across my lap as though he'd been doing it for years. To the waiter, to the hostess, to the world, he was gracious, generous. Watching him, I could almost believe it myself. Almost.

Between courses, he mentioned Europe. "I'll be gone a few weeks," he said, casual as weather. "You should come. Spend a few days in Switzerland. Shop, rest, see the Alps. Then meet me in London." He smiled, lifting his glass. "I think you'd like London."

I smiled back, though something in me stirred, a flicker of unease beneath the velvet promise. He was giving me things, yet I couldn't shake the feeling that every gift came with an unseen stratagem.

Outside, the city pulsed—horns, footsteps, the sounds of Boston rising all around us. He checked his watch, then turned to me with that practiced calm. "I've got family I need to see," he said. "Do you need anything before I go?"

I shook my head. "No."

"Your car to the airport's already arranged."

We stood there for a moment, the air cool against my skin. He leaned in, kissed my cheek, a soft, deliberate brush of lips that felt almost formal. "Until next time, then?" he asked, framing it like a question, as though he needed my reassurance that there would be a next time.

I met his eyes, steady. "Until next time."

Chapter Twenty-Nine

The plane cut through a ceiling of clouds, and I felt invincible. The coke I'd taken before boarding still hummed in my blood. Below me, the Atlantic shimmered like a promise. I wasn't the same girl who'd left Florida. Boston had changed me. David had changed me.

For the first time, I felt like the women I used to read about—the ones who moved through the world untouched, always ready for the next adventure. In those stories, there was always a man with a key, someone who opened the door to a new life. I wanted to believe David was mine.

I rested my head against the window of the first-class cabin, the hum of the engine steady and low. The future felt close enough to touch—Europe, the boutiques, the hotels, the kind of life that glowed. I closed my eyes and saw it all waiting: London lights, alpine air, nightclubs, strangers in strange cities.

But the fantasy dissolved when the wheels touched down in Fort Lauderdale. The cabin lights felt too bright. The spell broke. I stepped into the terminal expecting someone—Jade, maybe one of the girls—but the crowd moved around me like I was invisible.

I called Jade's cell. No answer. I tried the house. A girl I barely knew picked up.

"Raquel? A lot's happened. You should get here. Now."

"What do you mean?"

"Just—come back. Catch a car. Right away."

The line went dead.

I stood there for a moment, the airport humming around me, my suitcases at my side, the taste of something sour rising in my throat. The confidence I'd carried from Boston started to slip, leaving only the echo of it behind.

The house felt different the moment I stepped inside. The air was heavy, still. Voices drifted from the living room, low and uneven.

Kelly was the first to see me. She stood near the couch, eyes red, hands trembling. A beautiful Cuban girl with striking eyes, she looked both undone and wired, as if her tears were sharpened by lines of cocaine.

"Raquel," she whispered, her voice breaking. "Jade's dead."

The words didn't register.

"What?"

"Mia found her this morning." Kelly's breath hitched. "Overdose. Suicide. She swallowed a bunch of sleeping pills."

The room went quiet. Time seemed to slow, sound pulling away. I stared at her, waiting for the world to correct itself.

Kelly dropped to the floor, sobbing. The confident woman I knew was gone. She looked small, frightened, her mascara smudged, her hands shaking.

I couldn't move. Couldn't speak. It didn't make sense. Jade wasn't the type to give up—she fought, she led, she held everything together when the rest of us came undone. I saw her face in my mind, that sly, knowing smile, the way she carried herself like nothing could touch her. Now she was gone.

Grief pressed against my chest, heavy and hollow all at once. The room blurred at the edges, the furniture fading into shadow. I felt the floor sway beneath me, the air turning thin. The confidence I'd carried from Boston, the power I thought I'd gained, vanished in an instant.

When Kelly finally spoke again, her voice was barely there. "They came and took her body away while it was still dark, so the neighbors wouldn't see."

I blinked, the words sinking in one by one. My voice came out quieter than I meant it to. "Who took her body?"

Kelly wiped her nose, eyes hard now, voice edged with something close to hate. "Two security guards from the club."

The room seemed to tilt again. My mind raced, searching for something solid to hold onto. Jade gone. Taken away before dawn. No ambulance. No police.

I swallowed hard. "But... what about her family?"

For a moment, she didn't answer. She just stared at me, eyes hollow, the silence stretching until it felt like it might break.

When she finally spoke, the words cut clean and cold.
"Raquel, Anthony is her family."
Her voice cracked.
"He's her father."

Chapter Thirty

Grief has a way of rearranging everything. The house felt different without Jade—quieter, smaller, stripped of its rhythm. Her presence had always filled the air, sharp and alive, like perfume that lingered long after she left the room. Now there was nothing.

Her death reinforced that strength isn't limitless. It's a mask she had to wear to endure. The armor she wore came with weight, and there was a cost to appearing too beautiful.

I kept seeing her in flashes—laughing in the kitchen, fixing her lip gloss in the mirror, dancing barefoot in the living room to the Rabbit in the Moon CD I'd brought from Tampa that she couldn't get enough of. She seemed so sure of herself. Almost untouchable. But maybe that was the point. Maybe the act of being untouchable was the very thing that broke her.

The house felt hollow the next morning. No music, no laughter, no Jade. The silence pressed against the walls, thick and uneasy. Anthony hadn't been around for days. One of the other girls, Lila, was handling the schedule.

I sat on the edge of my bed, still half-dressed from the night before, the weight of everything settling in. I couldn't stay here. Not like this.

It wasn't fear that drove me—not exactly. It was something deeper, older. An ache for something clean, something familiar. My mother's voice.

I found Lila in the kitchen, canvasing a spreadsheet. "Tell Anthony I'll be back in a week or so," I said.

She barely looked up. "Sure."

I packed everything I could, knowing the girls would probably borrow or take anything I left behind.

At the airport, I booked a last-minute flight to Tampa. No plan, no promise, just a pull I couldn't ignore. I needed to see my mother. Needed to remember who I was before all of this.

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The flight was short, the descent smooth. As the plane dipped over the bay, the skyline came into view—low and wide, the light soft and gold across the water. Tampa. Home, or something like it.

I caught a cab outside the terminal, the driver quiet except for a low salsa station humming through the speakers. The air was heavier here, sweeter. I cracked the window and breathed it in—salt, heat, and something fried drifting from a strip mall kitchen.

We turned onto Columbus Drive, the heart of West Tampa. Storefronts with sun-faded awnings, murals of saints and baseball legends, old men in guayaberas smoking outside corner cafés. La Teresita was buzzing, its parking lot full, the windows glowing like a diner in a dream. People spilled out onto the sidewalk—families, waitresses, kids chasing each other between cars.

It was all still here. The same, but smaller somehow. Like the city had shrunk while I was gone, or maybe I'd just grown beyond it. The pastel houses with their rusted fences, the endless rows of palm trees, the streets that once felt wide and alive—now they seemed narrow, almost delicate.

When we pulled up to my mother's house, I paused before opening the door. The yard was neat, the hedges trimmed, the grass clipped clean. As if the manicured edges could erase the years of nightmares inside.

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My mother opened the door before I could knock. For a moment, she just stared at me, her hand pressed to her chest, eyes wide with surprise. Then she smiled, and it softened everything—her face, the years, the space between us.

"Look at you," she said, pulling me into her arms. She smelled like powder and coffee, her embrace warm but tentative, as if afraid I might vanish.

The house was spotless. The curtains open, the air faintly floral. No bottles, no ashtrays, no lingering fog of scotch.

She moved slower than I remembered, careful in her steps. There was a calm to her now—medicated, measured.

"I'm glad you came," she said, guiding me into the kitchen. "I've been meaning to call."

She poured two cups of café con leche and sat across from me. "I'm different now," she said. "I'm not drinking. The doctor has me on something. It keeps me… steady."

I nodded. "You look good."

She smiled, small and tired. "There are some health things," she said, waving a hand. "But nothing to worry about."

"What kind of things?"

"Oh, you know," she said, eyes darting away. "It's nothing."

I let it go. For now.

She reached across the table, took my hand. "The money you've been sending—you don't have to do that, sweetheart. But it's helping. Things have been tight."

"You sure?"

She nodded. "Your stepfather's sick. Can't work much. Money's drying up."

She didn't ask what I'd been up to. She didn't have to. The quiet between us said she knew.

After a moment, she smiled again, wistful. "You remind me so much of your father," she said. Her eyes softened, gaze drifting somewhere past me. "You have to be careful."

The words lingered, gentle but heavy, the way only warnings wrapped in love can be.

I offered to get a hotel, told her I didn't want to be in the way.

But she shook her head, setting her cup down with a gentle clink. "Please stay," she said. "We'll have a slumber party in your sister's old room. We'll make a night of it. Pop some popcorn, watch a movie."

Her smile reached her eyes, and for a second, I saw the woman she used to be—lighthearted, funny, alive.

I hesitated, but there was a softness in her voice I couldn't refuse. "Okay," I said.

She grinned, a flash of girlish excitement breaking through the years. "Good. I'll find us something to watch. Maybe that old Jayne Mansfield one you liked."

I followed her down the hallway, the light low, the air faintly humming with memory. For the first time in a long while, I let myself feel it—not the ache or the guilt or the distance—but the comfort of being close to my mom, however temporary.

Later, we curled up on the bed in my sister's old room, a bowl of popcorn between us, the glow of the TV washing the walls in soft blue light. The Girl Can't Help It flickered to life—Jayne Mansfield in all her impossible glory.

We laughed, marveling at her outrageous beauty, her body a cartoon of desire, her voice like spun sugar. My mother shook her head, smiling. "Lord, look at her. They don't make them like that anymore."

I laughed too, not just at the movie, but at the sound of her voice—light, unguarded. It felt like old times, before him. Before everything.

For a little while, the years fell away. We were just two women, mother and daughter, watching a movie, safe in the moment, and letting ourselves forget.

Chapter Thirty-One

I stayed at my mother's house for a few days, long enough to remember why I'd left. She was sweet, careful, always hovering a little too close, her moods measured in milligrams. The house felt heavy—every room carrying the weight of what we'd survived. My stepfather shuffled through the hallways in slippers, coughing into the quiet, eyes tracking me in a way that made my skin tighten.

I took her shopping one afternoon, let her pick out a few new things—soft sweaters, a pair of shoes she didn't need but loved. She lit up at the register, childlike. When we got home, I left five one-hundred-dollar bills on the counter, told her it was for groceries.

"You don't have to," she said.

"I know."

By the end of the week, I couldn't breathe in that house anymore. The walls pressed too close, the past too loud. I called Tish.

"Come stay with me," she said, like she'd been waiting for the call.

Tish's apartment was small but bright, full of incense smoke and half-burned candles, old rave flyers taped to the fridge. We stayed up late, catching up, trading stories, talking over each other the way girls do when the years between them start to dissolve.

Sometime after midnight, we started reminiscing about old friends.

"Do you ever talk to Jason anymore?" she asked.

"Jason," I repeated, smiling. "God, I haven't talked to him in forever."

He'd been a fixture of my early nights—the first boy who made the chaos feel like adventure. Blond hair, pale blue eyes, the kind of face that didn't belong in the places we went. His body was lean and cut, shoulders broad, jaw strong enough to break glass. There was something clean about him—not soft, just effortless.

We'd met at a rave, both high, both radiant in that temporary, chemical way. He was straight-appearing, the kind of beautiful that excited

people, and together we tore through Tampa's nightlife like it was ours—drugs, laughter, music so loud it rewired our hearts.

"I heard he's in South Beach now," Tish said, pulling her knees to her chest. "Living with a bunch of rich gay boys—South American models, some European trust fund kid, and a chocolate heir. Richard... something?"

"Forte," I said, remembering. "Richard Forte."

Tish grinned. "Sounds fun."

I laughed. "It does sound fun."

Later, lying awake on her couch, the name kept circling back. Jason. South Beach. A life shimmering on the edge of fantasy. I felt the old pull again—adventure, transformation, escape. Maybe it was time to go find him.

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South Beach in the '90s was a Mecca for the jet set and the beautiful. Before the college kids and rappers, before the enforced bottle service and bling, it was pure glamour—the kind that shimmered like heat on glass.

The city was alive with possibility. Ocean Drive was a runway of sun-kissed skin and designer fashion, pastel Art Deco facades gleaming under a sky so blue it felt painted. Models and moguls sipped espresso at sidewalk cafés, photographers prowled for faces, and everyone—everyone—looked like they were waiting to be discovered.

At night, the strip transformed. Neon bled across the pavement, and the ocean breeze carried perfume, the scent of adventure, and the hum of bass from clubs where lines curled around the block. Gianni Versace was still alive then, his mansion a landmark, his presence a blessing on the scene. The Warsaw Ballroom pulsed with sound and light, a temple where drag queens, designers, and demigods danced until dawn.

Ingrid Casares and Chris Paciello ruled the night, their club Liquid a magnet for the stars—Madonna, Donatella, Naomi, Tyson—all orbiting like constellations. Inside, the air was electric. Men in silk shirts, women in backless gowns, trans goddesses flown in from Paris and São Paulo—all glittering beneath strobes, all chasing the same high: to be seen, to be wanted, to belong to the myth.

It was glamorous. It was heady. It was a world where pleasure and fantasy were the only laws.

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The flight felt different this time. No nerves, no second thoughts—just the steady hum of engines and the quiet thrill of escape. I wasn't running from anything. Not exactly. I was chasing the version of myself that belonged somewhere like this.

When the plane touched down, I slipped on my sunglasses, smoothed the hem of my skimpy dress, and stepped into the glare of South Beach. I had the designer clothes, the body, and the beauty to walk the walk now.

I found Jason's number and called as soon as I landed. He answered on the first ring, his voice groggy, hungover from the night before. "Sophia?"

A pause, then a laugh. "Where the hell have you been?"

"Everywhere," I said.

He told me to wait at the terminal. Twenty minutes later, he appeared—tall, golden, easy in his skin, just as I remembered. But it was the man beside him who took my breath away.

Sebastián.

He was one of the most beautiful men I'd ever seen—six foot two, lean and sculpted, Latin features carved from a classic film. His skin was sun-bronzed, his smile dazzling white, his presence undeniably sensual.

Jason grinned, wrapping me in a hug that smelled faintly of the night before and exhaust. "Look at you," he said, holding me at arm's length. "You're exactly the same—just better."

"And you," I said, smiling back. "You look like trouble."

He nodded toward Sebastián. "This is Sebastián."

Sebastián took me in his arms and embraced me, warm and firm. "Welcome to South Beach, princess," he said, his heavy South American accent rolling through each word like a melody.

Jason led us through the parking garage to a classic Firebird—cherry red, polished to a mirror. A muscle car for a muscle man. It was mint, loud, unapologetic, and nothing like the kind of car you'd expect a gay man to be driving, which was part of Jason's appeal.

He slid into the driver's seat, Sebastián taking shotgun. I climbed into the back, the leather hot against my skin, the air thick with gasoline.

Jason glanced at me in the rearview, grinning. "You're going to love it here," he said. "The men, the clubs, the scene, the drugs... it's incredible."

I smiled. "I was going to get a hotel—"

Sebastián twisted in his seat, eyes flashing. "No. You stay with us. We have plenty of room. Besides, we know everyone, everywhere. You're with us."

Jason gave me a quick side-eye signal, a silent reassurance. It was all good.

I leaned back against the seat as the Firebird pulled out into the bright Miami sun, wind catching my hair through the exposed T-tops, bass from some passing car thumping through the street. It was time to forget again, at least for a little while.

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Sebastián's apartment was in the heart of South Beach, a whitewashed Art Deco building on Euclid Avenue. He shared the space with Jason and a muscular South American bodybuilder named Roman.

But the place was more than a home. It was a party palace, a crash pad for some of the most beautiful men on the beach—a revolving door of models, dancers, and men running away from life.

They called it La Casa, and everyone knew it. Music pulsed from the windows at all hours, laughter spilling into the hallway. Inside, mirrors caught the light and bodies moved through every room like a living collage of tan skin and sculpted muscle.

One by one, they appeared—Richard, Eddie, Santiago, Juan—each man more beautiful than the last. A tribe of sexy lost boys, loyal to the night, encircling me like I was one of their own.

There was no judgment here, no need to explain where I'd been or what I'd done. In this house, beauty was currency and family was whoever showed up after midnight.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Sebastian's apartment on Euclid Avenue had become my Neverland. A week had passed, though time there didn't move in days so much as in rhythms. There was always music playing, someone coming in, going out, half-dressed, singing, dancing, or sprawled across the sofa till the sun beat through the windows.

Roman had a stash he kept tucked away—crystal meth, ecstasy, Special K, GHB—never sold, never flaunted, only shared with those who lived inside his orbit. It felt like a secret covenant, a whispered indulgence passed between beautiful people who thought themselves untouchable. They broke me of my cocaine habit. They called it dinosaur food. No one cool was doing that on the beach.

With my boys, rooms always seemed to expand, their edges blurring, laughter folding into music. Every sense heightened, every touch electric. For a moment, I understood what Peter Pan must have felt, lifted from the ground, flying above the world that once hurt him.

Nights were endless and mornings went on forever or until we couldn't go anymore. We danced until our skin glistened and our voices grew hoarse—Amnesia, Fat Black Cat, Liquid, Warsaw, Chaos. Each club a temple, each DJ a prophet.

When the clubs closed, we didn't stop. The party just shifted—to houses, hotels, rooftop terraces where Adora, Paloma, or Chyna Girl would give impromptu drag performances as the sun came up. Someone always had another pill, another line, another reason to stay awake.

We were young and impossibly beautiful, the hottest crowd in the hottest city in the world.

In the clubs, I was a goddess. The lights found me, clung to me, crawled across my skin like diamonds. Straight men stared, entranced, unsure what they were seeing but certain they wanted it. There were no sexual rules in South Beach at that time—just attraction, curiosity, and heat. Desire conquered every boundary.

Warsaw was our Studio 54—a glittering sanctum where fame and anonymity blurred together, where models danced beside drag queens and movie stars slipped through the crowd unnoticed. The air itself vibrated, and under the strobes, I felt infinite.

When my boys weren't around, my partner in crime was Nicole Xtravaganza—a jet-set transsexual party girl with the face of a young Claudia Schiffer and the confidence and sex appeal of someone born to be adored. We were a matched set: golden, reckless, insatiable. Together, we floated from club to club, rolling on ecstasy, laughing too loud, partying too long.

There were nights I lost myself completely—indiscriminate encounters in shadowed corners and after-hours dens, tangled with bartenders, dick dancers, blue-collar mechanics from Hialeah. Bodies blurred together in the haze, names forgotten before dawn.

But even at the height of the chaos, the world outside still turned. My European trip with David had been postponed, but Anthony was trying to reach me. Europe needed confirmation. Two calls were waiting in Boston, one in New York. He wanted answers. He wanted me back at the house in Harbour Beach. The thousands of dollars I had made were dwindling. The pull of cash was calling.

Chapter Thirty-Three

Morning came too quick.

Pale light spilled through the gauzy curtains, washing the room in soft gold and aftermath. My eyes blinked open to a kingdom of ruin—empty bottles glinting on the counter, ashtrays spilling over, the faint echo of music still pulsing from some forgotten speaker.

The tribe was scattered across the apartment, beautiful boys in tangled heaps—shirtless, dream-drunk, draped in Versace underwear, passed out but hours away from starting all over again. The apartment smelled like sex, weed, and stale champagne—the closing notes of a night that never really ended.

I lay still for a moment, listening to the quiet hum of Sebastian's breathing next to me. My body ached, but not unpleasantly—a souvenir from too many hours lost to ecstasy, K, and music.

Outside, South Beach was waking.

I slid from the sheets, careful not to disturb the dreamers, and padded barefoot across the cool tile. The mirror over the vanity caught me mid-step—a tanned ghost of glamour, makeup smudged, my hair curly and wild, eyes rimmed with smoke. For a beat, I didn't recognize her.

Sophia.

Raquel.

Both. Neither.

I reached for my phone, the screen lighting up like a flare. There were messages from Anthony—three voicemails. *Call me. Urgent.*

I sighed, slipped out onto the balcony, and dialed.

He answered on the first ring. "Where the hell have you been?"

"Miami," I said, my voice still trying to find its perfect pitch. "You told me to take some time."

"That was weeks ago. You fell off the map. David has been calling. I had other clients asking, and I had no answers."

I rubbed my temple. "I needed a break."

He exhaled sharply. "You want to make ten grand tonight?"

That woke me. "What's the catch?"

"It's a single night. A private booking at The Delano. Very high profile. He requested you personally. But—"

"But what?"

"I need to see you first."

I laughed, low and tired. "Anthony, I'm already in Miami. What, you want me to drive back so we can talk face to face?"

"I haven't seen you in weeks," he shot back. "One of the girls said she saw you rolling your ass off at Twist in the middle of the fucking day. If that's true, you're not walking into The Delano until I lay eyes on you myself."

I leaned against the railing, watching the sun rise over South Beach. Below, the street was already stirring—cars humming, palm trees swaying and dancing in the breeze.

"I'm fine," I said softly.

"I'll be the judge of that." His tone softened. "Sophia, listen to me. This isn't a game. This client—he's famous, and he's cautious. He'll want to see you before he decides anything. Discretion is everything. You walk in there looking like the goddess I know you are, then you're set. But if you look spun out, I lose the booking and you lose credibility. You understand?"

I stared at the horizon, the old feelings beginning to stir beneath my skin. The party was over. The work was waiting.

"I'll meet you in an hour," I said.

"Good girl."

He hung up, and I stood there for a moment longer, the phone still warm in my hand. Behind me, my beautiful boys began to stir, stretching, yawning, already laughing about the night before. For them, it was a cycle—another round, another sunrise, another party.

For me, it was something else.

I turned back toward the mirror. My reflection was waiting. I gathered my hair, twisted it up, and let Raquel look back at me.

Here we go.

Chapter Thirty-Four

When I walked into the Delano, trailed by a chauffeur carrying my bag and a 350-pound bodyguard, I looked every inch the star. Gone were the remnants of yesterday's party. My body was poured into a skin-tight Versace dress, the fabric clinging to me like a second skin. Smoky eyes, slicked-back hair—the perfect balance of sex and drama.

I moved through the lobby like someone accustomed to being watched. Heads turned, but no one spoke. I was ushered past the concierge and staff with their silent stares and whispers, straight into a private elevator, doors sliding shut with a quiet hush.

No one said a word.

By the time we began our smooth ascent, my pulse was drumming. Anthony hadn't told me who I'd be meeting—only that I'd recognize him the moment I saw him, and that I should play it cool.

The suite was expansive and immaculate—everything you'd expect from a five-star South Beach penthouse in the sky. Light spilled through gauzy curtains that swayed in the ocean breeze, revealing an immense terrace beyond, white loungers set like sculptures against the horizon.

I took it all in—the pale stone floors, the gleam of glass and chrome, the champagne on ice waiting patiently for me. Before I had a chance to lift my glass, the bodyguard stepped forward.

"I need to see your purse," he said.

I blinked, half-smiling. "Are you serious?"

He didn't flinch. "I'm serious. I need to check for recording devices or cameras."

I set my purse on the glass table and stepped back, watching as he opened it with clinical detachment. Lipstick. Compact. A few folded bills. Nothing more. He sifted through each item as if handling evidence, then gave a curt nod.

"Thank you," he said, closing it and handing it back.

Without another word, he turned and disappeared down the hall, the door clicking shut behind him.

Silence.

For the first time since arriving, I was alone. The room seemed to exhale. I crossed to the terrace, sliding open the door and stepping into the warm South Beach air. Below, the city shimmered—white rooftops, palm fronds, the glint of ocean beyond. I took a slow sip of champagne, the bubbles bright against the back of my throat, and let the moment stretch.

The door behind me opened.

He stood framed in the doorway, sunlight catching his dazzling smile—a familiar silhouette drawn from movie screens and magazine covers, even films I watched with my mother. I'll call him Jessie. Arguably the greatest comedic talent of his generation, his time at the top had faded, but he was a legend nonetheless.

"Raquel," he said, his voice carrying that same sly rhythm the world once adored. "You're even more stunning than Anthony promised."

He crossed the room toward me, his presence somehow both commanding and gentle. Up close, he was even more handsome than I expected. The years had been kind to him; his boyish charm hadn't faded with time.

"You don't have to be nervous," he said, smiling.

"I'm not," I lied.

He laughed, the sound easy and familiar. "Good, because I am."

That caught me off guard. He rubbed the back of his neck, glancing around the room like he was still figuring out where to stand. Then, almost instinctively, he slipped into a story about a director he was there to meet—an impersonation followed, all wild gestures and exaggerated accent.

I found myself laughing, the tension in my shoulders melting as he performed for me, and only me. The rhythm of his voice, the timing, the way his eyes lit up with every punchline—he was brilliant, magnetic, utterly disarming.

For a few minutes, it felt like we were suspended outside time—just a girl and a legend in a penthouse above the city, sharing the one thing he knew to give best: laughter.

The air between us softened, laughter giving way to a quiet stillness. He looked at me for a long moment, his smile fading into something almost reverent.

"You're... remarkable," he said quietly. "I wish—" He stopped, eyes tracing my face as if committing it to memory. "I wish I could have someone like you. All the time. I wish it were possible."

His words landed with a weight that surprised me. There was no performance in them now—only ache.

He reached out, his fingertips grazing my shoulder, then sliding down the length of my arm with the care of someone touching silk. When his hand found mine, he lifted it to his lips.

I didn't pull away.

He drew closer, his breath warm against my cheek, his eyes searching mine for permission. And when he kissed me—slowly, deeply—it wasn't a question. It was confession.

I felt the world fall away. The city below, the waves beyond, even the reason I'd been sent—it all blurred into the space between us. He was tender, almost fragile, as if my beauty pained him, as if holding me might somehow take away his longing.

I kissed him back with equal fervor, matching his yearning with my own, meeting him in that fragile space where desire and mercy felt the same. What passed between us felt less like transaction than recognition—two strangers who, for one suspended moment, understood exactly what the other had lost and were trying to find in each other.

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I saw Jessie a few more times after that—brief encounters in different cities, always touched by the same feelings of his longing. But what stayed with me most wasn't the champagne or the view, or even the way he looked at me like I was something rare.

It was the laughter.

The way he could make the world outside fall away until there was nothing left but light and breath and the sound of joy, borrowed for a moment, and then gone.

Chapter Thirty-Five

The plane cut through the night sky like a silver thread, stitching continents together. Below us, the Atlantic lay vast and unbroken, black as glass, the scattered lights of cities shrinking into stars.

Bo sat beside me, headphones around his neck, script pages folded into a crumpled pile on his lap. I leaned against his shoulder, lulled by the hum of the engines and the warmth of his body. We had fallen into a rhythm so natural it almost startled me—the small gestures that belonged to lovers: his hand finding mine, my head resting where it fit, the silence between us easy and unforced.

We weren't a couple. We both knew that. Whatever existed between us lived in the spaces no one else could see—in shared glances, in quiet laughter, in the way he reached across the armrest without thinking. It was affection stripped of expectation, comfort without contract. A romance, maybe, but one with an open door.

He turned slightly, eyes soft, voice low so as not to disturb the sleeping cabin.

"London first," he said. "Then Zurich, then God knows where. You ever been?"

I shook my head. "No. I've seen the pictures."

He was quiet for a while, staring out the window as though searching for something in the darkness beyond the glass. "You know," he said finally, "I've been thinking about getting out. The movies, the shoots, all of it. It's not what it used to be. You start to forget where the work ends and you begin."

I watched his reflection in the window—the curve of his jaw, the exhaustion in his eyes. There was something almost boyish in the way he said it, as if the thought of quitting was a silly story someone else had shared with him.

"I've been talking to David," he continued. "Trying to get him to back this idea I've got—a gym in West Hollywood. Nothing fancy. Clean.

Private. A place guys can train, feel good about themselves. Maybe one day I could own it outright."

His voice carried a flicker of hope that broke my heart a little.

"That sounds good," I said softly. "Real."

He nodded, but his smile didn't quite reach his eyes.

"Yeah. Real."

The engines droned on, steady and relentless. I could feel the dream collapsing even as he spoke it. Something in him knew David would never let him go. The men like Bo who existed in David's world weren't meant to escape; they were meant to stay until they burned out.

Still, I let him talk. Let him build the vision, brick by brick—the sunlit weight racks, the music, the sense of purpose that might one day replace performance. I wanted to believe in it for him, for us, for the fragile possibility that we could both be something more than what we were paid to be.

His hand tightened around mine as the plane tilted eastward, chasing dawn. And for a moment, high above the sleeping world, I let myself imagine it too—a life without parts to play, without deals to negotiate, without David. Just bodies that belonged to themselves again, breathing, building, becoming.

The cabin lights dimmed further, slipping into that gentle gray between night and morning. I shifted slightly, and Bo stirred beside me, half-asleep. His arm brushed mine, a touch so small and unintentional it sent a warmth through me I couldn't name. I turned toward him, watching his chest rise and fall, the faint stubble along his jaw catching the light.

He opened his eyes, just for a moment, and met my gaze. No words. No smile. Just that quiet recognition—two people holding the same fragile hope, knowing it couldn't last. The world beyond us was already waiting.

He reached up, fingertips grazing my cheek, a touch more instinct than intention. I leaned into it, eyes closing, breath steady. For those few seconds, we were untethered. Just together.

The intercom crackled, announcing our descent. The spell broke softly, without sadness, the way a dream fades when morning finds it.

Bo withdrew his hand, gave mine a final squeeze, and turned toward the window. Clouds peeled away, revealing the first outlines of London below—gray, ancient, beautiful in its restraint.

He exhaled slowly. "Back to earth," he murmured.

I nodded, smoothing my hair, the mirror of his motion. "Back to earth."

Outside, the city waited. And with it, David.

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The jet bridge's metal floor felt cold under my heels, a sharp contrast to the warmth we'd shared aloft. I exhaled, pulling my Dolce & Gabbana coat a little tighter as I followed Bo down the corridor toward immigration. The crisp London air drifted in through open doors.

Customs was efficient, quiet, discreet. The officers' faces were polite but unreadable: passports stamped, glances taken. Bo's hand brushed mine as we stepped into the terminal proper, luggage in tow. Outside, the car waited; a chauffeur in a sharp cap held our names on a small placard. He opened the rear door as we approached; the rumble of tires, the scent of leather and wet pavement. We climbed in, and for a moment no one spoke. London scrolled by through glass: marching rows of townhouses, gaslit streetlamps, the quiet majesty of Mayfair.

"Connaught," Bo said to the driver, as though naming a prayer. He sounded tired.

Inside The Connaught, we stepped into a hush. The lobby felt less like a hotel and more like a private mansion—marble floors gleaming under soft lights, pillars carved with age, walls warmed by wood paneling and carefully chosen artwork. The sweeping mahogany staircase, the ornate molding, the curated elegance of Old London greeting us in style.

A discreet butler took our bags. "Welcome. We have your suite prepared. May I escort you?" His voice was low, courteous, exact. We followed him past polished corridors; the scent of fresh-cut flowers drifted through the air, the muted hum of soft classical music somewhere above.

We entered the suite: a vast, adjoining suite, rooms flowing into one another. Soft rugs muted footsteps, windows draped in heavy cloth, the elegance of British restraint.

David's instructions came via a note left on the desk:

> *Rest until evening. I will see you after midnight at Trade. Entertain yourselves until then, but tread lightly. It will be an all-nighter. Dress sexy.*

Bo let out a soft laugh, as though the weight of jet lag had lodged in his bones. "Sexy," he said. "Like that's a stretch." He dropped his bags.

We stood there, silence filling the spaces. I closed my eyes. "Sleep," I said. "We should."

He nodded. "Yes."

So, we did. For hours, the suite absorbed us: we slipped into unconsciousness in rooms drenched in quiet, in comfort, as though the world outside could wait. We slept until the hush outside was too dim to ignore, until the light in the curtains shifted, until we were pulled back into awareness.

Late evening, we roused ourselves. Still jet-lagged, heavy, but enough time remained. We dressed—Bo in dark slacks and a fitted, see-through shirt that clung to his chest; me in a Cavalli dress with a neckline so plunging I risked spilling out completely.

We walked through the lobby again, quieter now, staff nodding with subtle deference. The hush over the city pressed around us, Mayfair's streetlamps glowing through the windows. I caught Bo's arm as we passed a mirror. He met my eyes for a moment—tired, soft, questioning. No words. But we both felt it: the line had shifted. It was time to turn on.

The Connaught Bar's ritual unfolded: a white-gloved server rolled the Martini trolley beside us, letting us choose bitters and strength. In that exchange, we were back in motion, anticipation reanimating the quiet. We drank enough to feel the fire that would carry us through the night. Then, we headed to Trade.

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The car curved through narrow streets slick with rain, Mayfair falling away behind us as the city transformed. Neon crept in where lamplight had been, storefronts shuttered, shadows deepening with each turn. Bo sat beside me, silent now, gaze fixed forward. Between us, the space was charged—anticipation, the quiet hum of something about to ignite.

Trade loomed ahead, an underground supper club reborn as a temple of flesh and rhythm. It was still early—too early for the masses to arrive—but that was the point. David didn't do lines, didn't do crowds. He did access.

A doorman in black met our eyes, nodded once, and opened the door.

Inside, the air was thick with pheromones. Lights strobed in slow motion, catching on chrome, on mirrors, on bodies moving in the dark. The bass hadn't yet reached its full heartbeat, but it pulsed low and steady, like something alive, waiting.

Whispers moved through the room before we did. Heads turned. Conversations paused, glasses lowered. Fifty pairs of eyes found us as we crossed the threshold—Raquel and Bo stepping out of rumor into flesh.

It was a small crowd by Trade standards—private, curated. The elite of a world that glittered after dark. Producers. Performers.

We passed dancers on raised podiums, bathed in red and blue light, their skin slick with oil, their eyes glazed over. Some wore nothing at all.

Bo walked half a step ahead, every inch the star—shoulders squared, shirt translucent, the fantasy of thousands of gay men who watched him fuck like an animal on screen. I followed, my heels striking the floor like a metronome, Cavalli clinging to every curve. We moved not like guests, but like apparitions.

Someone whispered my name. Raquel. It rippled through the space, passed from mouth to mouth like a secret.

At the bar, I caught a flash of a face I recognized—my old friend, Joey Stefano, luminous and doomed, eyes bright with something chemical, something infinite. He raised a glass in greeting, smile sweet and dangerous. The room adored him, even as it devoured him.

"London's the place to be tonight," someone murmured as we passed.

Maybe it was.

Bo's hand found the small of my back, anchoring me in the storm. The music shifted—deeper now, primal. The DJ layered beats like spells, summoning heat, dissolving boundaries.

We found ourselves drawn to the center, where the light was brightest, the air electric. The scent of poppers hung heavy. Somewhere, champagne hissed open.

I felt eyes on me—hundreds of them, or maybe just one, watching from the dark. David's world was built on spectacle, and tonight I was the show.

But this time, I wasn't his creation. I was my own.

Every step I took claimed space. Every look returned became a kind of worship. I could feel it—the shift from object to icon. From girl to goddess.

Bo leaned close, his breath warm at my ear. "You hear that?"

"What?"

"The silence. They don't know what to do with you."

The bass dropped, the lights flared, and in that instant, I wasn't part of the scene—I was the scene.

The goddess had arrived.

A man in black approached, leaned in close. "Mr. David would like to see you."

Bo and I followed him through the haze, deeper into the club. David was waiting in a private alcove, but still visible from the main area of the club.

He sat sprawled across a low leather banquette, shirt unbuttoned, a soft smile playing on his lips. His eyes shimmered—not sharp, not commanding, but glazed with warmth. There was no edge tonight, no demand. Only pleasure.

He looked up at us, voice smooth, languid. "Come sit."

We did. Bo to his right, me to his left. David's hands found our knees, grounding us. From the dance floor beyond, I could feel the eyes, dozens of them, watching. The message was unmistakable. We belonged to him. And that was the point.

He glanced toward the door. "Bring Joey," he said.

Moments later, my old friend appeared, smile soft, eyes glittering. David greeted him with an embrace, tender and brief, before pulling a small vial from his pocket.

"Open," he said.

One by one, he placed a drop of pure liquid MDMA on our tongues—Bo's, Joey's, mine, then his own. The taste was metallic and clean.

David leaned close, breath warm against my ear. "I just want to roll tonight," he whispered.

The music swelled, slow and deep, threading through our veins. Light fractured around us, the room tilting toward bliss.

Bo's hand found mine, fingers lacing, pulse steady. I turned to him, and our lips met—slow, searching, electric. Joey's laughter spilled like champagne, soft and dizzy, as he leaned in, touching Bo's chest, his jaw, his mouth. Bo drew him closer, kissing him with the kind of fearlessness that made the room pause.

David watched, eyes half-lidded, the faintest smile crossing his lips. From where he sat, removed but commanding, he studied us—not with lust, but with something quieter, almost wistful. For a heartbeat, I caught it in his gaze: the ache of a man who could summon youth but never reclaim it, who could shape beauty but never wear it again.

Through the haze, I watched him watching us. With us, but not of us. And something in his eyes confessed what his pride never would—he wished he were.

Chapter Thirty-Six

Morning came pale and silent.

The curtains were half-drawn, soft London light spilling across the bed where we lay—Bo, Joey, and I—limbs tangled, breath slow, skin warm against skin.

Across the room, David sat in a chair by the window, watching.

He was fully dressed, his coat draped over the back of the seat, a half-empty glass of whiskey in one hand. He didn't move, didn't speak. Just watched, the same quiet detachment in his eyes that I'd seen before—but softer now, like something had burned out overnight.

I stirred, blinked at him. "What are you doing?"

He didn't answer. Just took a long breath, set the glass down, and reached for his jacket.

On the desk beside him, an envelope waited—thick, cream-colored, the kind David favored when money was involved. He tapped it once with his finger, a silent gesture.

"I don't need you guys to come with me," he said finally, his voice rough from the night. "Go to Paris or something. Enjoy yourselves. I'll see you in Miami."

He stood, slipped into his jacket. At the door, he paused, hand on the frame.

For a moment, he looked back at me—the faintest smile, something almost tender cutting through the exhaustion.

"You..." He hesitated, searching for the word. "You were... luminous last night."

Then he was gone.

The door clicked shut behind him, and the room was quiet again.

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Paris felt like a dream we'd stumbled into by accident.

We checked into a small hotel off Rue des Abbesses, the kind with wrought-iron balconies and narrow stairwells that smelled of rain and linen. From our window, rooftops stretched in every direction, chimneys and clouds dissolving into the distance.

At night, we ate at Jules Verne, high above the city, the lights of Paris spread out below us. Bo ordered wine. I chose the view. We didn't talk much—just sat there, suspended in the quiet ease of being somewhere no one expected us to be.

Over the next few days, we let the city lead. Mornings in cafés, afternoons wandering Montmartre, where painters filled the air with color and cigarette smoke. The Parisians watched us as we passed—two strangers out of place but not unwelcome, moving together through their city like a story they weren't sure they believed.

We wandered for a few days, making love when we felt like it, letting the romance of the city hang over us like a spell. Something in both of us knew the spell wouldn't hold. He would go back to Los Angeles. I would return to Florida.

And the next time we saw each other, it would be under different circumstances.

But for now, we had Paris—its light, its quiet corners, its borrowed magic—a perfect pause before the world called us back to who we were.

The High Life

Chapter Thirty-Seven

South Beach welcomed me back like a wayward queen.

The boys were still there—sun-burnished, beautiful, forever young. They greeted me with shouts and laughter, arms flung wide, kisses pressed to my cheeks as if no time had passed at all.

I fell back into the South Beach rhythm—late dinners, long nights, and drug-fueled decadence that dissolved into mornings, sometimes lonely, sometimes not.

I met Sunny at Liquid—a dancer with eyes like broken glass. She was a petite brunette full of fire and energy, dark and exotic, with an insatiable appetite for all the wrong things. There was a reason she was so well-connected. Something about her reminded me of Sheena, and that gave me a strange sense of home in a landscape that always felt like outer space.

Sunny knew everyone in South Beach, and I mean everyone. She pulled me into tiny cliques of sex and drugs that even my well-established crew was unaware of. We partied with musicians, actors, and has-beens, in town for a night or longer—but all of them on the make and ready for a good time.

After that, the nights blurred.

I had been running on empty with Sunny for about two weeks when I realized I had a commitment coming up and needed to put the brakes on.

I reluctantly fell out of bed and got into the shower. I squeezed myself into a Hervé Léger bandage dress, strappy stilettos, and the hot pink lip gloss that drove David crazy. I grabbed my purse, tossed a few things into an overnight bag, went outside to meet the driver.

When I slid into the back seat of the car, I pulled out the last of my cocaine. I wasn't sober, not by a long shot—just frayed, that hollow space between high and crashing, where everything feels like it's moving slightly ahead of you.

The causeway spilled onto Star Island, a jeweled crescent floating in the black water. I'd been here before, but it always felt unreal—like driving through a mirage built for gods.

Star Island was a shrine to it.

The streets were lined with mansions wrapped in light, each one a monument to someone's conquest—music moguls, film stars, sports legends, all staking their claim on this sliver of paradise. Iron gates gleamed, fountains whispered, cameras watched. It was wealth at its most extreme.

The house David was staying in dwarfed the mansions around it. The driver turned through the gates and up a long drive flanked by palms.

The home rose before me—white stone, glass walls, and terraces layered like a fortress.

It was hidden—sheathed in lush vegetation, hedges tall as walls, flowers blooming in shadows. The house seemed to breathe secrecy, sealed off in its own cocoon of privilege.

The car stopped. The engine idled.

For a moment, I just sat there. My reflection hovered in the glass—eyes rimmed with exhaustion, lips lacquered pink.

Addiction has many faces. Tonight, I was about to be confronted with my own—not just to cocaine, but to cold, hard cash.

I stepped out into the humid air, heels striking the stone path that led to the front door. The house loomed above me—white, silent, waiting.

David greeted me there, framed by the doorway, wearing a silk robe the color of smoke. His eyes blazed, fever-bright and restless.

I gave him a half smile. "You look like a man with a bevy of Playboy playmates waiting in the other room."

His mouth curved—too sharp, too slow. "Something like that," he said. His voice was dark, tinged with excitement. Maybe more.

He stepped aside, gesturing me in.

The air inside was cool and still. Somewhere in the distance, voices murmured—soft, indistinct, rising and falling like a soundtrack. For a moment, I thought they were coming from a movie playing in another room.

But no. The sound was too real. Too close.

David closed the door behind me. The click echoed through the vastness, final and cold.

I followed him into the main room—a vast, open expanse wrapped in glass. The ocean spread out in every direction, a black mirror flecked with

light. Beyond it, the distant skyline shimmered, the city's glow trembling across the dark water.

"What a view," I said, my voice soft.

David turned toward me. "Look at this view," he said.

The tone made me pause—flat, menacing, threaded with something I couldn't name.

He reached into the pocket of his robe, pulled out a small remote, and pressed a button.

The massive television on the far wall flickered to life. For a moment, it was only sound—the low, rhythmic hum of bodies, a sigh, a moan. Then the image sharpened, and I saw a familiar face. A familiar body.

Bo.

Onscreen, he was younger, but unmistakable—naked, glistening under studio lights, moving between men and women with effortless, brutal grace. A bisexual orgy. A performance.

Before I could respond, movement stirred behind me.

One by one, men began filing into the room—silent, deliberate. Faces I recognized. Names I knew. Performers David had shown me before, in films he liked to play during our nights together—some straight, some gay, all beautiful.

They formed a semicircle around us, each man lit by the low gleam of the room's chandeliers. I counted as they entered.

Fourteen.

Bo was among them.

For a moment, my breath caught. The sight of him—calm, unreadable—sent a pulse through me, part fear, part familiarity.

Then Jade's voice came rushing back, clear as ever: Never panic. Stay in control.

I steadied my breath, lifted my chin, and turned to David.

"What is this?"

He smiled, slow and certain. "This, my beauty," he said, "is a gangbang... if you agree, of course."

A hush fell over the room, the air dense with expectation. I felt every eye on me, waiting—measuring the pause between his invitation and my response.

Inside, my pulse quickened, but my face stayed still. Fear was a luxury I couldn't afford.

I turned slowly, meeting the gaze of each man in the room before I crossed to Bo.

He stepped forward first. No words. Just a quiet nod, and then his arms were around me—steady, warm, real.

For a moment, the noise in my head went still.

The squeeze he gave me was subtle but certain, a promise without language. A light in the darkness ahead.

I drew a breath, held it, and when I exhaled, I felt the fear settle into focus.

"I need to speak to you," I said to David. "Alone."

His brows lifted, curious, amused. But he nodded, motioned for me to follow.

We slipped away from the others, down a quiet corridor lined with abstract art and mirrors that made the space feel endless.

He pushed open a door, and I stepped inside.

The bathroom was gleaming—white marble and endless glass, every surface reflecting light. A bottle of Belvedere sat open beside the sink. Lines of cocaine stretched across the counter in perfect symmetry, calling me.

When the door shut behind us, something in me snapped.

"You fuck," I hissed. "You dragged me here for this? You're no gentleman. You think I'm going to let fourteen guys run a train on me for fifteen hundred dollars?"

Silence filled the room, cold and absolute. His reflection stared back at me from every pane of glass.

I took a step closer. My voice dropped, steady and sharp.

"You know what you are, David? You're a fag. A fag who can't face it. You hide behind me, behind them, and you work out your issues in front of us like some fucking experiment."

He didn't speak at first. The silence stretched, long and taut. I could hear the faint hum of the air vent, the ticking of my pulse in my ears.

When he finally looked at me, his expression had softened—almost thoughtful.

"You may be right," he said quietly. "Maybe I am a fag."

He let it hang there, unflinching.

"But I don't pay you to analyze me. I pay you to fuck me—and whoever I choose. Because that's what you do. You fuck people for money."

The words landed like blows, each one deliberate, precise. I could feel the heat rising in my chest, my jaw tightening, but he wasn't done.

"Remember that night in London," he continued, "when Bo and Joey were all over you?"

His gaze held mine, unyielding.

"There was a moment you went to the bathroom, and I watched—every single person in that club watched you move through the room. Not because of what you are, but because of who you are. It was extraordinary. What you are doesn't matter."

He took a step closer.

"You have something very unique. Something people respond to. And I want it. I want to inspect it. Understand it. And maybe..." He paused, voice lowering to a near whisper. "Maybe something in me wants to break it too."

Silence hung in the air, dense and heavy, like the pause before a storm. Neither of us moved.

Then David exhaled, slow and measured, and when he spoke again, his tone had changed. Softer. Smooth. The charm returning like a mask.

"We got off on the wrong foot tonight," he said, voice low, coaxing. "I don't expect you to let every man in that room fuck you for fifteen hundred dollars."

He stepped closer, close enough that I could smell the vodka on his breath, the faint trace of cologne clinging to his skin.

"Bo will be the only one fucking you," he continued. "You interact with the other men. And with me. That's all."

He paused, watching my face.

"And for that, I'll pay you fifteen hundred for every man that's there."

His eyes glinted. "You do the math."

The number hung between us, obscene and heavy.

"I need a minute," I said.

David studied me for a long moment, then nodded. "Take your time."

He turned and left, the door closing softly behind him.

Silence returned, thick and humming.

I stared at my reflection in the mirror. The face that looked back at me wasn't a stranger, but it wasn't the girl I used to be either. Somewhere between the two, I'd built this woman—beautiful, unique, bought and sold.

I knew I was standing at a crossroads.

I wasn't entirely repulsed. There was a pull—the money, the men, Bo. The promise of control wrapped inside surrender. But something in me

ached. My heart felt heavy, beating slow and low, like it was counting the cost.

Flashes of my life pulsed behind my eyes—faces, nights, streets I'd walked alone. A child's voice. My mother's laughter. My father.

How did I get here?

The question came and went like breath.

I reached for the bottle of vodka and took a deep drink. The burn steadied me.

Then I bent over the counter and inhaled two lines of coke, ultra-pure and clean. I waited, eyes closed, as the rush spread through me—heat and lightning, a fragile kind of courage.

When I opened my eyes, I felt the mask slide back into place.

I left the bathroom and stepped into the main room.

The men were undressed, bodies gleaming under the low light, tangled in varying degrees of pleasure. All except Bo.

He stood apart, waiting and watching me, a sadness in his eyes that broke something quiet inside me.

"Let's get this done," he said when I was close enough to hear.

"Let's get this done," I whispered.

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When the party was over and the men began dispersing, David told me where to find my money.

I gathered my clothes and went back to the bathroom.

Bo was already there, bent over the counter, doing lines. The room still smelled like vodka and sweat, the marble gleaming under too-bright light.

I moved around him and stepped into the shower.

The water hit my skin like needles. It felt ice cold, even though it was burning hot. I could feel tears streaming down my face, mingling with the water until I couldn't tell them apart.

When I stepped out, Bo was sitting on the counter, swigging Dewar's straight from the bottle.

I dried myself off, and pulled my hair into a wet ponytail.

"You want to go somewhere?" he asked. His voice was low, frayed. "I'm still pretty fucked up."

"No," I said. "I'm going home. I've had enough of this shit."

He looked at himself in the mirror, a vacant stare, searching for something that wasn't there.

"Do I look old to you?" he asked quietly.

I looked at him, unsure how to comfort him. I didn't answer.

I reached up, touched his face. And for a moment, I remembered the better times we had shared.

Then I left without saying another word.

Outside, I told David's driver to take me straight to the airport.

I caught the last flight back to Tampa.

My hair was soaking wet. I was crashing from the coke.

In my Louis Vuitton bag, I had a dress, some lingerie, and twenty-one thousand dollars in cash.

I cried the whole way.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

The mid to late nineties had a particular kind of quiet, a silence laced with hums. Televisions murmured in living rooms even when no one watched them. Answering machines blinked like patient eyes. Nights were still long and unscrollable; there was nowhere to vanish online, nowhere to prove you were still alive. You simply were, or you weren't, and the world went on without noticing.

I had a cell phone, but most people didn't. They had pagers. You could disappear for days then, and no one would question it. Absence was still allowed.

I look back on those years now and realize how fragile everything was, how close we all stood to the edge without knowing it. The world still felt wide then, like anything could happen, but it was already shrinking, pixel by pixel, preparing to slip inside a screen.

Back then, fame still had flesh. You had to be seen to be seen, in a club, a magazine, a rumor whispered down a bar. There were no feeds, no filters to make you beautiful if you weren't.

And when someone vanished, they vanished for real. And they did.

Joey Stefano died one winter, a few days before my birthday, alone in a motel room in Hollywood. He was twenty-six. He wasn't the first of our constellation to burn out, and the glow of his absence stayed in the sky far longer than many of his contemporaries. Books were written about him, stage plays. But the man I read about in the pages of those biographies was both familiar and a stranger. It's amazing, the multitude of masks one must wear when they do what we do.

Bo drifted away not long after, one day beside me, then gone. Not dead. Not physically anyway. Now and then I'd catch a rumor, a classified escorts ad in an L.A. weekly, a friend's friend who swore they saw him leaving a hotel in West Hollywood. But when I went looking, there was never a trail. He stopped making movies. He stopped modeling. And if he was still

using sex to survive, it was on the down low. I like to think he found peace, or something like it.

I left Anthony and the house in Harbour Beach behind. I never returned, and I stopped returning his calls. Disentangling myself from David wasn't so easy. He lingered, even in absence. It would take years for me to walk completely away from him, the lure of the life he provided me far too seductive. But for now, at least, I was somewhat free.

I spent a while in Tampa after leaving South Florida. It felt like a safe space. Part of me missed the pulse and excitement, but another part exhaled for the first time in a year. I saw old friends, spent quality time with my mom. I even spent some time with Andrew. It wasn't a reconnection of romance but a reminder that he was still there for me, still a port in the storm if I needed him.

For months after, I drifted—no plan, no purpose. I would take off without a moment's notice. There was always a flight to New Orleans, New York, Houston. I traveled from city to city, looking for a place that spoke to me.

I fell in love with Savannah, Georgia. I found quiet solace and the closest thing to peace wandering its moss-shaded streets and squares. I lived off the money I had made and saved, but there were connections from the past if I needed them. Financial security was no longer an issue, and that security allowed me to live without concern or care.

In Puerto Rico one winter, I ran into an old friend from my South Beach days—Chris. He was vacationing with his boyfriend. They convinced me to return with them to Miami for the White Party.

By then, it felt less like a getaway and more like a pilgrimage. A return to my tribe after too long away. Many of my boys had moved on—some to New York, others back to South America—but they still followed the circuit, that loose network of parties and cities that carried us from one season to the next. And when we all converged on South Beach for White Party, it felt like old times.

We spent the weekend together, rolling and dancing under the stars, the sets of Junior Vasquez, Tony Moran, and Manuel Lehman carrying us through the night and into the early hours of the morning. It was heavenly—familiar faces, beautiful people floating in a sea of ecstasy and bliss.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

The night was loud, alive, Paul Oakenfold on the decks, lights flashing like communications from another world. Mansion was at capacity, the atmosphere thick with sweat and the chemical smell that signaled everyone was on something. It was the kind of night where time felt elastic, a long party in the dark, and you could no longer tell if the sun had risen.

That's when I met Pasquale.

He approached me over the roar of the music, his eyes sharp, focused, studying me as though I were something he'd been searching for. There was something familiar about his gaze, not his face, but his attention. It reminded me of Frank, that Pygmalion-like precision, the way he saw beyond surface into shape, possibility, transformation.

We talked in pieces, our words lost and found between drops and crescendos. He told me he was a photographer. He was traveling with a small tribe of models—part of his chosen family. They followed the music, the light, the seasons.

He said he was planning a trip to the Greek Islands, just after the weather lifted but before the tourists came. A few months of creativity.

Later that night, as I sat with him in a corner and the music began to shift to something more sedate and the crowd began to thin, he told me he was working on a photo project exploring themes of beauty and intimacy.

Then he asked, simply, "*Would you like to join us?*"

The noise around us fell away—the music, the lights, the crowd—leaving only the question, suspended like a key to something new, another door.

Chapter Forty

To them, I was simply Sophia. No past or future, no aliases, no one expecting me to be anything but who I was in that moment. Pasquale and his circle knew, the way people in our world did, that beauty was often used to survive and thrive in a world where girls like me were relegated to subculture. But there was no judgment, no curiosity about where I had been or what I had been doing. We were all passing through something.

As I settled into my seat, I realized how little I knew about them. Pasquale had mentioned the islands, a photo project. But beyond that, nothing concrete—no itinerary, no promises, no guarantees. Still, I wasn't afraid. This was how life worked in those days.

In the nineties, the fast lane wasn't always a metaphor. One night you were rolling with friends at a party in South Beach, and the next, you were on a plane with strangers bound for somewhere you'd never been. It wasn't carelessness. It was faith—in motion, in luck, in the idea that something extraordinary could be waiting just beyond.

Pasquale had instructed all of us that this would be a sober adventure. Wine in the islands was fine, but the drugs and decadence of the circuit had to be left behind. At the gate, some of us handled it our own way—saying goodbye the only way we knew how. I took half a hit of X; one of the others finished the last of his coke and Tina, making the journey ahead far more talkative than we would have liked.

As the engines roared to life, I glanced out the window. Miami shimmered below, a city of noise and memories fading into cloud.

As we flew, I began surveying them quietly.

Thalia, Pasquale's muse, was a beautiful European model—dark, elegant, effortlessly poised. There were seven of us total, excluding Pasquale, and it was evident that we all carried a strange air—like emissaries from another world, a spellbinding mix of masculine and feminine, soft and hard.

The cabin lights dimmed, and one by one, the others drifted into sleep. The hum of the engines filled the silence between us, steady and low.

"They're all so beautiful," I said softly, watching the rise and fall of slumbering bodies across the aisle. "Androgynous, in a way—not like me, but in how they inhabit their own space. They seem... I don't know what the word is—unique, maybe."

Pasquale turned toward me, thoughtful. "Yes, I suppose."

He paused, eyes settling somewhere beyond the seatback in front of him. "I like to photograph the kind of beauty you don't see every day. I have no interest in the documentation of street life or the ordinary. Beauty is fleeting, and when you see something special, you must capture it before it disappears."

I nodded, the remnants of the X softening everything around me—his voice, the cabin, the faint hum beneath our feet. I felt open, weightless, as though the world had thinned to light and sound.

Then he looked back at me. "What do you think is beautiful?"

"I'm not sure," I said finally. "I used to think it was all about what you could see—faces, bodies, things. But now... I don't know. Maybe it's something else. A moment. A moment of truth you catch in all the crazy."

Pasquale studied me quietly, his expression softening. "You look beautiful right now," he said. "Like something's glowing around you."

I smiled faintly, unsure if it was the compliment or the remnants of the X making me light up from within. A friend used to tell me I would "glow" sometimes on ecstasy. They said in those moments I was almost otherworldly, as if something deep inside me—joy, pain, everything I'd ever hidden—rose to the surface and turned to light.

I felt that way now. Warm, suspended, unguarded. The noise of the engines grew softer, blending into the pulse behind my eyes. My thoughts began to blur, slipping between the now and the not-quite-dreaming.

Pasquale leaned back in his seat, his eyes still on me, though softer now, unfocused. I could feel the quiet between us—not heavy, not charged—just there, like breath.

And then, somewhere between one heartbeat and the next, I drifted into sleep.

Chapter Forty-One

I woke to light spilling across my face, soft and gold. The plane had already begun its descent, banking low over the Aegean. Below, the islands floated like fragments of marble scattered in a sea so blue it looked sapphire. For a moment, I just watched—quiet, still.

When we stepped out onto the tarmac, the air hit me. It felt warm, salt-laced, ancient somehow.

Athens was a city that felt alive in its bones. The streets were narrow and sun-bright, crowded with scooters, street vendors, and stray cats winding between café chairs. The smell of roasted chestnuts mixed with diesel. Everywhere, there were layers: cracked columns beside neon signs, beggars kneeling at the base of temples, tourists trailing guidebooks past graffiti scrawled in a language older than prayer.

Pasquale walked beside me, pointing out landmarks as though retracing old footsteps. He told me he'd grown up here, in a small flat above his mother's dress shop. He'd been barely out of his teens when a chance came to study in France, apprenticing under a photographer who taught at the Sorbonne. He spoke about Paris the way some people speak about first love—half nostalgia, half ache. I told him about my short time there, and he smiled as if my remembering made his memories all the more potent.

There was something steady in Pasquale, something that carried both pride and distance, like someone who had seen a lot and was a better man because of it.

We wandered through the Plaka as afternoon slid toward evening, stopping for coffee strong enough to wake the dead. The cups were small, the spoons delicate, the taste bitter and sweet at once.

For the first time in a long while, I wasn't thinking ahead—not about work or family, or who I had been, or what would come next. I was just there. Present. Watching the light fade across old stone, feeling the hum of the city settle into my skin.

We boarded the ferry at dawn. The port was half-awake, wrapped in a pale blue haze. Vendors sold coffee thick as mud, pastries still warm from their ovens. Gulls circled overhead, crying into the morning light.

Pasquale found us seats along the upper deck, near the rail. As the engines rumbled to life, I watched the city slip away—Athens shrinking into silhouette, the Acropolis a faint crown on the hill.

The sea stretched out before us, endless and calm. I'd never seen blue like that—so vivid and reflective. The others sat quietly, some dozing, some staring off into the horizon as if trying to memorize it. There was a peace in the motion—the slow churn of water, the rhythmic thud of the waves crashing against the hull of the boat.

Pasquale leaned back, eyes half closed, the wind lifting his hair. "We'll be in Santorini by afternoon," he said. "It's the most beautiful island, but not because it tries to be. You'll see."

I smiled, tucking my hair behind my ears, letting the spray cool my skin.

Hours passed in silence, broken only by the gulls and the hum of the sea. I thought about how far I'd come—not just in miles, but in the space between who I'd been and who I was becoming.

By the time the cliffs of Santorini appeared on the horizon, white and sun-struck against the sea, I felt lighter. As if I'd been washed clean, not of memory, but of its weight.

When we docked, the island rose before us in sharp contrast—black volcanic rock crowned with whitewashed villages that seemed to climb toward the sky. The air smelled of salt and citrus, and the sun pressed down, hot but forgiving.

We climbed into a small charter bus that wound its way up the cliffside, switchback after switchback, until the harbor below looked like a toy world—boats bobbing, trails of foam glimmering in their wake.

Our villa sat high above the water, its walls the color of milk, its shutters cobalt blue. Inside, everything was spare but beautiful—smooth stone floors, white curtains breathing in the breeze, a terrace that looked out over the caldera.

No one spoke for a while. We just stood there, looking out at the horizon, suspended in disbelief that anything could be so vast and so beautiful.

Chapter Forty-Two

We sat on the terrace with Pasquale, scattered at his feet like disciples. The sun was sinking behind the caldera, and the air carried that quiet sweetness of evening, the kind that made every word feel profound.

He spoke about the project in detail, though not like a man giving direction. He talked about instinct, about light, about the need for something organic, something unposed. "It can't feel staged," he said. "It has to breathe."

He called it Xotica. Seven models, seven stories, bound by the idea of beauty as something beyond perfection.

There was Nia, a beautiful eighteen-year-old transsexual from France. Petite, blonde, with small breasts, a counterpart to my more extreme persona. Candace, a stunning lesbian with a shaved head and a scorpion tattoo stretching across her back. Anthony and Rocco, identical twin brothers from northern Italy, godlike, chiseled, almost mythic. Marcos, the quintessential beautiful boy, a striking blend of masculine and feminine. Thalia, dark and mysterious, Pasquale's eternal muse.

And then, there was me.

There were several bedrooms, but with Thalia and Pasquale in the master, it meant the rest of us would have to share space. This was intentional, Pasquale explained. It encouraged immediate closeness and camaraderie.

It was crucial to the life of the project that we appear to be familiars, lovers, playmates, best friends. He wasn't encouraging sexual interaction. He was asking for something emotional and tangible, something beyond simple attraction.

That first night, no one wanted to sleep. The villa felt alive, humming with the sound of the sea below, waves rising and breaking against the cliff.

We gathered in the living room, scattered across cushions and low chairs, limbs draped and entangled in lazy comfort. Pasquale sat near the terrace doors, sketching in a small notebook, the soft scratch of pencil

against paper blending with the wind. Thalia's voice drifted faintly from the shower, a melody half remembered, half invented.

I rested my head in Rocco's lap, his fingers weaving absently through my hair. "I love the wildness of your curls," he said, his accent lilting, tender. "You should never straighten them. They do what they want, like you."

I laughed softly. It had been a long time since touch felt this innocent, not a prelude, not a performance, just connection for its own sake.

Anthony sat close beside us, leaning lightly against his brother, one hand resting on Rocco's knee, eyes half closed. There was something grounding in the way they were with each other, no boundaries, no discomfort, just the ease of twinship that needed no explanation.

Marcos stretched out on the rug nearby, one arm thrown over his eyes, humming something slow and low. Nia dozed on the sofa, Candace tracing idle shapes across her bare shoulder.

For a while, no one spoke. We just listened to the sea, to each other's breathing, to the quiet wonder of finding ourselves here, together, on the edge of the world.

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Morning arrived slowly, gold spilling across the terrace and flooding the villa in warmth. One by one, we drifted from our rooms, drawn to the light like moths. A local woman arrived at the door with a basket of food and pastries and a thermos of strong coffee, a ritual that would repeat itself throughout our time there.

Pasquale moved with purpose, quiet but focused, setting up his equipment near the terrace doors. "We'll start simple," he said, looking to me. "I want to see how the light holds you."

He began with test rolls, nothing elaborate, just me and the morning. I stood barefoot, hair loose, skin catching the sun that spilled in from the sea. The lens followed gently, no command, no expectation, only the rhythm of breath and movement.

Thalia watched from a low chair, her eyes steady, her voice soft when she spoke. "Arch your back here... let your neck fall." She moved her own body in small demonstrations, the curve of a shoulder, the tilt of a chin. Pasquale nodded, adjusting focus, his mouth forming the faintest smile.

He'd worked with the others before, he knew their angles, their temperaments, but with me, it was new ground, a discovery in progress. The camera clicked in steady cadence, each frame another fragment of becoming.

When the light shifted and the first rolls were done, he carried the film into the back room, a makeshift darkroom he'd built in what had once been the villa's bakeshop. Minutes passed, the rest of us lingering in the kitchen, the smell of developing chemicals drifting faintly through the air.

Then Pasquale emerged, prints still wet in his hands, eyes bright. "Yes," he said quietly, almost to himself. "This is what I hoped for."

I took one from his hand, a test shot, nothing staged, and stared at the girl in the frame. The light caught something soft in her face, something unguarded. For once, not performing, but simply being.

Pasquale stayed behind, developing the rest of the test shots, while the rest of us set out to explore the island. We followed the winding streets up through whitewashed alleys and blue-domed chapels until we stumbled on a small bar called Paracas.

Inside, the walls were faded yellow, the air heavy with the smell of wine and tsipouro. The locals turned to look as we entered. As individuals we were striking, but together, we seemed almost surreal, a strange presence that pulled every gaze toward us.

We slid into a corner table, laughter rising easily between us. A pitcher of local wine appeared, deep red and slightly sweet. Glasses clinked, shoulders brushed, and slowly, the room softened around us.

When a few men with instruments began to play near the door, strings and tambourines, voices lifted in harmony, we were already half drunk, half giddy. Candace pulled Nia to her feet, the twins followed, and soon we were all moving, laughing, spinning, clapping along as the locals joined in.

I can still see it, the light slanting in through the open door, the music echoing off stone walls, Thalia tossing her hair back in laughter, Marcos' hand warm in mine. It was a day that shimmered, the kind that etches itself into your memory, vivid and untouched.

I remember it as perfect—a perfect day. One of the happiest days of my life.

Chapter Forty-Three

The morning of our first real shoot, Pasquale woke us before dawn. The air was cool and sharp, tinted pink at the edges where the horizon was beginning. We loaded the van with gear —tripods, lenses, bolts of fabric— and drove toward Akrotiri, where the cliffs dropped straight into the sea.

A local boy named Andreas was waiting for us when we arrived. He couldn't have been more than twenty, all curls and sun-browned skin, with a Roman nose and eyes the color of olive leaves. Pasquale introduced him as our helper, a student from the village who knew the terrain and could carry equipment down the narrow paths.

As we made our way along the cliffs, Andreas kept close, steadying me with a hand at my elbow whenever the ground tilted or the rock turned slick. His touch was careful, almost formal, but his glances weren't. There was curiosity there—not the hungry kind I'd come to expect, but something softer, as though he was trying to solve the mystery of me without asking a single question.

The sun rose higher, washing the red rock in gold. Pasquale scouted positions, marking spaces with his hands, testing angles, directing the others where to stand. I felt the weight of the camera on me again, but this time, it didn't feel like scrutiny. It felt like sunlight—warm, endless.

Andreas handed me a sheer length of white gauze, helping me anchor it against the wind, and he didn't blink when I stripped nude, naked before him in all of my glory. Our fingers brushed—brief, electric. He smiled, shy but sure. I smiled back.

Pasquale called to me, voice echoing against the cliff face. "There, hold it. Just like that."

The fabric lifted in the breeze, a small sail catching light. I closed my eyes, felt the salt cling to my lips, the heat beginning to gather on my skin. Behind the lens, Pasquale murmured something to himself—a quiet note of approval, or maybe awe.

When we broke for water, Andreas sat beside me on the rocks. "You're not from here," he said, not a question, but a statement.

"No," I answered. "But maybe I was, once. Do you believe in past lives?"

He smiled, gaze trailing out to the sea. "I don't know. Maybe... you?"

"I don't know. Maybe."

Silence settled between us, gentle as the tide. He breathed deeply of the air. "Then welcome home."

Chapter Forty-Four

I sat alone on the terrace, watching the sea shift from indigo to silver as the sun began to rise. The house was quiet, the others still sleeping.

Three months had passed like a dream, a season suspended in light. I could trace every day if I tried: the mornings spent chasing sun across stone, the long afternoons where Pasquale directed us through laughter more than instruction, the evenings stretched out in wine and warmth.

We had become a family of sorts, drawn together by accident, bound by something harder to name. Beauty, maybe. Or belonging. Or the rare grace of being seen without disguise.

Andreas had gone back to his village weeks ago. Our brief affair, if that's what it was, had ended as gently as it began. No promises, no apologies. Just a kiss in the shallows one afternoon and the quiet understanding that some things were meant to stay here, on this island, caught between memory and myth.

There had been other moments too, small and unplanned, the night Rocco and I fell asleep on the beach, drunk on wine and exhaustion, the tide curling at our feet. We woke tangled in a blanket of stars, laughter in our throats, sand in our hair. No regret, no explanation. Just another story folded into the days.

From where I sat, the caldera stretched wide and still, the water smooth as glass. Somewhere below, a boat cut through the surface, leaving a trail that shimmered before disappearing, like everything else.

We had shot so much, alone, in pairs, all together, but it wasn't the photographs I would remember. It was the spaces between them. The way Candace would hum when the light was good. The way Nia would press her cheek to Thalia's shoulder before a take. The twins' laughter, echoing off the cliffside. Pasquale's soft exhale when he captured what he was looking for.

The images came together slowly, each one a fragment of the world we built that summer. Marcos and I at sunset, naked and sharing a martini, the

sky painted in gold behind us. Thalia's haunting beauty caught in shadow and light, her face half-turned, her eyes holding secrets the camera could never fully reveal.

But my favorite was a photograph Pasquale called *Seven*, the magnum opus of the whole endeavor. We were all asleep in each other's arms, wrapped in the gauze of morning light. I was between the twins, their strong arms cradling me in an intimate embrace. It captured us at our most real, our most vulnerable.

The photograph was all the more powerful when you considered the bonds that can develop when total strangers in need of *something* suddenly find themselves surrounded by people who can provide it. I'm not sure what the others needed, or what they were searching for. But like me, they were searching. And Pasquale knew it. He recorded it. He captured that longing in all of us on film, and it was magical.

Chapter Forty-Five

The plane touched down in Tampa just after noon. From the window, the city looked smaller than I remembered—flat streets, wide skies, the bay a dull sheet of silver in the distance. I gathered my things and moved through the airport in silence, the weight of what waited for me pressing closer with every step.

At baggage claim, families hugged, children shouted. I felt apart from all of it—too old for homecomings, too young for this kind of loss. My mother was dying.

I rented a car at the counter, signed my name on the dotted line, and stepped out into the afternoon heat.

The drive to the house was familiar and foreign at once. Elegant oaks draping over the streets, the loud energy still clinging to the neighborhood botanicas and markets.

He opened the door before I could knock. His face had aged, but his eyes were the same—sharp, assessing. "She's awake," he said, stepping aside.

The smell hit first. Antiseptic. A television murmured from another room. A record spun softly in the corner—La Lupe's voice rising and breaking, as if the drama in her song could soften the one unfolding here.

One of my aunts was there. It had been awhile since she had seen me, and although she seemed taken aback by me visually, she embraced me warmly.

My mother sat in her chair near the window, thin but alert, a blanket over her legs. She smiled when she saw me. "You made it."

"I did." I leaned down and kissed her cheek. Her skin was warm, fragile.

We talked about small things—the flight, the weather, and big things, too. Greece, and all of my experiences there. Her eyes were alive as she lived vicariously through my adventure. She asked if I was staying. I told her I hadn't decided yet. I could feel his presence in the next room, a shadow moving behind the walls.

When she grew tired, I helped her to bed. She squeezed my hand before letting go. "You look good," she said. "Healthy...and beautiful."

Outside, I stood by the car a long time before getting in. The light was too bright. I knew I couldn't stay there, not under that roof. The past lived in every room.

That night, I drove through South Tampa, windows down, music low. The streets were lined with shops, cafés, new construction that hadn't been there before. Somewhere between Bayshore and Howard, I saw it—a For Lease sign glowing in front of a well-manicured building.

I parked without thinking and pressed my face against the window, looking inside. A lavish space in a safe neighborhood. I called the number and arranged to see it.

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The next morning, I met the leasing agent in the lobby. She was cheerful and efficient, clipboard in hand, the kind of woman who could size you up in a glance.

I was beautifully dressed and carrying the kind of bag that instinctively told her I could afford my rent.

The building smelled faintly of fresh paint and jasmine from the courtyard. Sunlight streamed across the tile floors, catching the brass fixtures that gleamed like new money.

The unit was even better in daylight. Tall windows, open layout, a small balcony overlooking the trees. It wasn't extravagant, but it felt elevated—secure, private, mine.

"I can show you the paperwork," the agent said, unlocking the door to the office across the hall. "It's a simple process. First and last month, security deposit. We'll need your credit score, but no income verification required."

I nodded. It was 1999; everything still ran on trust and signatures. No portals. No background checks. Just paper, ink, and the confidence that came from looking like you belonged.

By noon, it was settled. I handed over the cashier's checks and the keys were placed in my palm.

Upstairs, I walked the space again, letting my footsteps echo off the bare walls. I could already see it—the furniture, the art, the soft light spilling across the floor at dusk. A bedroom with clean linens, fresh flowers

on the counter, a stereo system playing Nina Simone and Janis Joplin on a loop.

This would be my refuge. A place to bring my mother when she was well enough. A place to come back to when she wasn't.

For the first time in years, I was home by choice.

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I spent the next week furnishing the loft.

Most of what I chose was simple and modern—clean lines, soft fabrics, muted tones. A cream sofa, glass tables, a few well-placed plants to soften the light. I hired a delivery service to bring in a bed and a small dining table, then spent hours arranging everything until the space felt balanced. Every choice was deliberate, from the framed photographs I hung on the wall to the scent of the candles burning near the window.

It was the first time I'd ever lived alone, the first time I could close a door and know no one would follow. In the morning, I sat quietly with my coffee while sunlight poured across the floor. At night, I'd pour a glass of wine, open the balcony doors, and watch the trees shift in the wind. The quiet didn't scare me anymore. It felt earned.

Between decorating and errands, I made regular visits to see my mother. I'd bring small things to brighten her days—flowers, silk scarves, fresh fruit from the market. Some afternoons, when she was strong enough, we'd sit on the porch together, saying little, just listening to the cicadas and the passing cars. She seemed softer now, less guarded, grateful for my presence.

My stepfather rarely spoke beyond pleasantries. He carried himself like a man living with constant pain. I didn't ask questions; I didn't owe him any more of my voice.

Weeks passed, and the rhythm of my new life settled in. But beauty was expensive. The loft, the furniture, the hospital co-pays, the steady drip of medical bills—it all added up faster than I expected. One night, after another prescription was needed that insurance wouldn't cover, I sat at the kitchen table with my checkbook open and my stomach tight.

I stared at the balance. I could stretch it for a while, but not long enough.

The phone sat on the counter, silent, waiting. I hadn't called him since Greece. I told myself I wouldn't.

But I needed help.

I picked up the receiver, hesitated, then dialed his number.

David answered on the second ring. "Sophia," he said, his voice low, familiar. "Are you alright?"

Hearing him use my real name still caught me off guard. He'd stopped calling me Raquel months ago. Besides, he needed my real information for wire transfers and cashier's checks, the steady stream of which kept him connected to me even if we weren't together much. It was a reminder that whatever I had or was building bore his touch.

"I'm fine," I said. "Just... things have been difficult. My mother's sick. I'm helping with her care, but it's a lot."

There was a pause. Then, simply, "What do you need?"

"David, I didn't call for—"

"Just tell me."

I recited the amount, voice steady. We didn't talk about details. We didn't talk about anything else.

I knew when he said he would wire me the twenty thousand dollars I wouldn't have to wait or worry.

"I'll always be here when you need me," he said before hanging up. His tone was gentle, but it left no room for negotiation. Whatever we were, it was no longer client and benefactor. He would be here for me—but always on his terms.

I sat there a long time after, the receiver still warm in my hand.

I was grateful. I was confused. I told myself it was just money, a lifeline, nothing more. But as I hung up, I felt the thread between us tighten again, invisible and unbreakable.

Chapter Forty-Six

The weeks blurred into months. Some days were better than others. On her good days, she would sit by the window, sunlight catching the silver in her hair, and talk about things I'd almost forgotten.

One afternoon, her voice softened. "I've been writing your father," she said, eyes fixed on the view outside. "He writes back. Every week. They go to your aunt's P.O. box."

I turned toward her. "You have?"

She nodded, a faint smile playing across her lips. "Believe it or not, he may be released soon. We've been talking about... maybe being together again." Her voice trailed off, dreamy, wistful. "It's something we've been holding onto. A little hope. I know time isn't on our side, but it feels good to share the same dream again."

She reached for the table beside her and lifted a small bundle of letters, tied neatly with ribbon. Some of the envelopes were faded, the ink smudged and thin with age. She pressed them into my hands.

"If anything happens to me," she said, "put these somewhere safe. Or burn them. But never let anyone read them. They're for your eyes and your eyes only."

I nodded, unable to speak.

Then she pulled a box from beneath the blanket at her feet. It was small, velvet-lined, filled with heavy gold pieces and diamonds—a lifetime of history gathered in one place.

"For you," she said. "For everything."

Her hand trembled as she brushed a strand of hair from her face. "If your sister ever needs help, promise me you'll help her. She doesn't have your strength. And she has the baby now."

I felt the weight of it all—the letters, the jewelry, the promise.

"I promise," I said quietly.

She smiled, and for a moment, I could almost see the woman she'd been before the storms, before the bottles, before the ache.

Outside, the light was fading. I helped her back to her chair, her hand resting gently in mine.

We didn't say much after that. There was nothing left to explain.

My mother died on a rainy afternoon. She died in the ambulance on the way to the hospital. By coincidence, Lissette had been visiting when it happened. She came with me as I followed the car, drowning in tears, knowing it was the end. My sister met us in the emergency room. It was three of us when the doctors came to tell us she was gone.

Chapter Forty-Seven

In the weeks after my mother's death, I unraveled. Grief hit in waves—sharp, unexpected—and with it came the guilt of time I couldn't get back. Her funeral was hard. Family members who hadn't shown up for her in life grieved her in death. Some wouldn't even look at me.

Jason came from Miami, and Andrew came to pay his respects. Celeste, Roberto—faces from the past, still there for me, just a little farther away.

For a week after, I disappeared into a blur of noise, reconnecting with Sheena, Tish, and a new circle of South Tampa friends who lived like the night would never end. We spent days at The Stilt House—a home on Interbay that had become the epicenter of marathon parties fueled by music, ecstasy, and whatever else made the hours dissolve. Days bled into nights, and I let them—numbed by movement, held by men who could sense the despair beneath the surface, surrounded by laughter that never felt real.

One day, I slipped away while everyone was rolling and drove back to my apartment.

The loft was still and clean, the air faintly scented with the jasmine candle I'd lit days before. Sunlight spilled across the floor in long, quiet lines. I set my bag down and opened the box of letters my mother had given me, the ribbon still knotted the way she'd tied it.

I read for hours.

They were exchanges between her and my father from years ago—letters written when my sister and I were still children, before the drinking, before the distance. In her handwriting, I saw her fear and longing, the weight of trying to hold a family together while the world kept slipping through her fingers. I saw a woman doing her best with what she had, fighting storms I hadn't understood, loving us in ways that didn't always reach.

By the time I finished, the room was dim. The pages trembled slightly in my hands.

Whatever I had wanted her to be—whatever version of mother I'd carried in my mind—was never possible. She had done her best.

And finally, I realized, her best had to be enough.

I placed the letters back in their box, gathered her jewelry, and locked them away in the safe—everything she'd entrusted to me, all of her secrets and stories, never to be shared.

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A few weeks later, I met Andrew for lunch in Hyde Park. We hadn't seen each other since my mother's funeral.

We sat outside beneath a striped awning, the air warm and still. He talked about work, about the changes in Tampa, about how fast everything was shifting. Then he leaned back, studied me for a moment, and asked, "What do you know about the internet?"

"Not much. Why?"

"It's coming," he said. "Most people don't have access yet—outside of offices or Kinko's—but it's going to change everything. There's this new service—AOL. America Online. You'll be able to log in from home soon. Reach people. Build things."

I sipped my wine, watching him over the rim of the glass.

"I'm not trying to make you do anything," he said, "but a friend in Vegas told me people are starting to build these digital spaces where users pay for content. Pictures, video. Lots of Playboy Playmates are doing it. No one in the trans space is doing it yet. What do you think about building a website?"

Chapter Forty-Eight

It started with an idea—and the money to make it real.

Andrew believed in me, or maybe he just believed in potential when he saw it. With his backing, I began meeting a small team of early internet entrepreneurs—self-taught coders, digital hustlers, men and women who saw the web not as a tool but as a frontier.

We gathered in coffee shops and borrowed offices, sketching plans on napkins and printer paper. None of us really knew what we were building, only that it had never been done before, not like this.

In my mind, I saw it clearly: Playboy with a penis. An online magazine, not a porn site. No cheap banners, no pop-ups, no sleaze. Just me—a curated fantasy, elevated and artful. Glamour, mystery, a wink at the forbidden.

They asked about content, traffic, revenue models. I talked about mood, tone, and presentation—the look and feel of a world that didn't exist yet. I wanted something beautiful, aspirational. Not a place to click, but a place to linger.

In the early weeks, I met with executives from CCBill and iBill, the new names everyone in the adult space was whispering about. They were the first to figure out how to move money online, how to turn desire into commerce. Without them, nothing could exist.

The meetings were held in rented offices with humming servers and folding chairs. No one was sure it would work, but we were all willing to bet it would.

We invested thousands before we even took the first photographs. By the time we found a photographer willing to take this journey with us, Andrew and I were starting to worry. We weren't even online yet.

Every meeting ended with another invoice—web hosting, development, licensing, design. The expenses multiplied before a single dollar came back in. Still, I couldn't cut corners. The vision was too clear, too specific.

I wanted light that flattered, not exposed. Images that invited curiosity, not consumption. This wasn't about sex, not really. It was about beauty, power, allure.

We met the photographer, John Benson, through a mutual friend. He had turned his girlfriend, Lori Benson, into a star, her imagery online an early amalgamation of art and sex. John understood the medium before most. He knew how to shoot for the screen, how to create images that glowed rather than posed.

When I explained what we were building, an online magazine, part fantasy, part autobiography, he didn't flinch.

"I've never done anything like this," he said.

"No one has," I told him.

We rented a small studio off Kennedy, just enough space for a backdrop, lights, and a fan that worked when it wanted to. I handled the styling myself—lingerie, custom-made bikinis from Lucy at *Suits You* on Tampa Road, designed just for me. The first shoot wasn't perfect, but it was almost there.

By the end of the day, John showed me a few frames on the camera. Even unedited, they were striking. For the first time, I saw it—not just an image, but Raquel Reyes taking shape.

Chapter Forty-Nine

The closer we got to launch, the faster everything moved.

I was at the studio almost every day—sorting images, approving layouts, choosing which sets would debut first. The site was nearly finished: navigation polished, fonts clean, the design as minimal and elegant as I'd imagined. Every detail mattered.

We were building something no one had seen before, a world where glamour met autonomy. Soon, the name Raquel Reyes would live online—clickable, global, alive.

But even as the site took shape, another part of my life was stirring, something older, heavier, waiting just beyond the glow of the screen.

My father was getting out.

More than twenty-five years behind bars, and now, after decades of letters and stories, he was finally coming home.

By the time I heard the news, arrangements had already been made. Nick Scaglione—one of my father's oldest friends—had passed a few months earlier. His family, honoring a promise, offered my father a place to stay when he was released. It was a small mercy, but a powerful one. After so many years of concrete walls and steel bars, he wouldn't walk out into nothing.

When I saw him for the first time, he was standing in the doorway of the cottage they had provided, sunlight falling across his shoulders. His hair had gone gray, his hands rougher, but the same warmth lived in his eyes. He wasn't the young outlaw from my youth, but when the light caught his face just so, I still saw it. He was still beautiful. Nothing had changed.

We sat together for a long time, catching up in slow circles, letting the silence fill what words couldn't. At one point, I looked at him and asked quietly, "Do I make you feel uncomfortable?"

He didn't hesitate. "Absolutely not," he said. "You're my baby."

Then he leaned back in his chair, a smile ghosting across his face. "You know," he said, "when I was a teenager, I was down in New Orleans once—walking through the French Quarter with a friend. There were all these beautiful girls standing outside a bar. My buddy nudged me and said, 'You know those aren't really women, right?'"

He paused, eyes far away now, softened by the memory. "And I just thought to myself... wow. How about that. They were beautiful, whatever they were."

We both laughed. It was such a simple story, but it felt like something more—a thread pulled through time, a quiet kind of knowing that told me my father truly understood.

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Back at the studio, everything was moving fast. The site was almost live—images uploaded, landing page complete, the first membership options set. Weeks of work had turned into something tangible, something that felt alive.

John and I worked late into the night, reviewing photo sets and finalizing the galleries. Andrew handled the logistics—merchant accounts, domain hosting, the marketing rollout that would introduce Raquel Reyes to the world.

Each page, each photo, each line of copy felt deliberate. This wasn't just a website—it was a stage. A world I'd built from the ground up, pixel by pixel, frame by frame.

The countdown had begun.

We'd set the launch date for midnight on a Friday—symbolic, intentional. The hour when old worlds end and new ones begin.

The release was coinciding with a few chosen photos I'd uploaded to one of the very first free online chat rooms and message boards dedicated to transsexuals and the men who adored them. It was a calculated move, a spark before the fire. The images showed me in a cowboy hat and nothing else, stretched across a bed of hay—equal parts fantasy and defiance.

Those few photographs had already started to circulate, whispers turning into traffic, curiosity into clicks. The timing was perfect.

As the final files uploaded, I felt a rush of adrenaline and disbelief. All the late nights, all the planning, all the risk—it came down to this moment.

When the homepage went live, I stared at the screen in silence. My name in lights, the cursor blinking like a heartbeat.

Raquel Reyes. The TS Goddess.

It felt like stepping off a ledge and learning how to fly on the way down.

Chapter Fifty

The money came—slow at first, then in a wave.

It's hard to explain how fast the internet exploded in those early days. One minute it was a novelty, the next it was everything. If you were there from the ground up, it was like standing at the edge of the ocean and watching the tide roll in, bigger and faster every day.

People became millionaires overnight. Whole empires rose on the strength of a single idea, a single page, a single face.

That wasn't my story, not exactly. But it was close enough.

The money was constant, the flow steady, sometimes impossible to keep up with. Bank statements arrived monthly like miracles. I didn't even have to promote much; the traffic built itself. Word spread in ways no one fully understood. The site was new, the images fresh, the fantasy singular.

My images were unlike the amateur photos of trans girls circulating online. John was a master—used to shooting his wife and other beautiful women for adult films and top magazines. He applied the same light and grace to everything he did with me. Every shot carried intention. Nothing was rushed, nothing careless. I was a creature of invention, and he shaped his craft around me—presenting me to the world not as a woman, but as a goddess.

That difference mattered. People could feel it. They lingered longer, paid more, came back again and again.

As the traffic grew, so did the cash. Topless spreads followed in straight, gay, and trans magazines around the world. Each layout was a statement—polished, provocative, impossible to ignore.

Full nude was reserved only for my website, behind the paywall.

For the next decade, I would live in the wake of that wave—riding it, shaping it, sometimes getting lost in it. Other trans girls tried to duplicate what I was doing, and some were moderately successful. But I was the archetype. I was the one. And no matter how many followed, I existed in

a realm they could never quite reach. The difference between the sex they served and the mystique I carried was as wide as the Pacific.

The internet was a game changer for me. I took a website and turned it into a brand, a revenue stream. I began touring the country, working in clubs, meeting with fans. I featured in transsexual strip clubs in New Orleans and Madrid, where men would line up dozens deep for a dance.

When you're young and everyone wants you, you feel invincible, like the ride will never end. I thought I had seen it all, but I was just at the beginning of building a legend.

Chapter Fifty-One

As my website grew in popularity and I was consumed by everything that came with it, my father slipped further away from me. It was ironic—the man whose love I'd craved most, the person who had occupied my imagination for years, was finally here, and I couldn't give myself fully to it.

I don't know what pulled me away. Maybe it was the chaos, the travel, the endless motion that came with building a brand. Maybe it was fear—of being seen too clearly, of facing everything we'd missed.

A therapist once told me I was trying to punish him, that somewhere deep inside I wanted him to feel the distance I'd carried my whole life. I would hate for that to be true.

But the truth is, while the world was watching me rise, he was fading. And I didn't know how to hold both at once.

My father died soon after. I was with him, and I am grateful for that. I held his hand while he slipped away, assuring him I forgave him. He looked at me for a long time before the end. His eyes said he was sorry, but the words that escaped his lips were simple and deep.

"I love you, Jason."

It was as if the woman before him was invisible, and in those final moments, he saw the little boy from his past, running toward him—reaching for him.

Chapter Fifty-Two

The website ran itself now, a steady current of income moving quietly in the background of my life. The work had become routine—updates, photo sets, new members rolling in like clockwork. For the first time, I wasn't chasing survival. Money arrived without urgency. Freedom, the kind I used to dream about, was finally mine.

Once a month, I flew to Boston to see David. I don't know why. Part of me was grateful for the support he offered in my mother's final days, and another part knew that his wealth would always provide a soft landing if I needed it, despite our precarious history. The debauchery of our past had slipped away, as if something in him had settled after that ruinous night at the mansion on Star Island.

Our sex life no longer carried the charge of those early days. Most nights, we just dined in beautiful restaurants, then went our separate ways after a few minutes together in bed. He always wanted to fall asleep beside me, but I wasn't ready for that. I felt safe with him now, but not safe enough for that.

He was in the process of divorcing his wife. He shared details as if to impress me, or entice me. She would get the apartment in New York, a house in Miami, and support for the rest of her life. He seemed relieved to have it behind him.

One night, he took me to an Italian restaurant on Beacon Hill, one of his favorites. They knew him by name. The maître d' greeted us at the door with a handshake, and before we'd even sat down, a bottle of wine was already breathing on the table.

He didn't order from the menu. He never did. The chef came out to greet him, all warmth and deference, and they exchanged a few quiet words in Italian. I'd been there enough times to recognize the rhythm—David, the patron; the staff, the chorus; me, the precious guest in his private theater.

When the first course arrived, he poured my wine and asked, "Why are you still doing it?" His voice was calm, but there was a trace of

something else—curiosity, maybe fear. Fear of what the website had become, of the touring, of the growing empire he hadn't built. Fear that Andrew—partner, friend, the man who'd been there from the beginning—had the power to hold the pieces of me he never could.

"I'm free now," he said, settling back in his chair. "I can give you the world."

I looked at him across the table, candlelight flickering between us. "I don't know," I said finally.

He smiled—a small, tired curve of his lips—and lifted his glass. For a moment, it felt almost domestic, like this was what we'd been working toward all along: quiet dinners, easy silences, the illusion of normal.

We had fallen into a strange togetherness, one that felt comfortable for both of us. Whatever power he'd once held over me had softened into something closer to weekly phone calls and monthly companionship. He still lavished me with gifts, cash, and trips—part generosity, part insurance. Though he was threatened by my financial freedom, he didn't want to risk losing me completely.

And maybe, in some quiet part of myself, I didn't want to lose him either.

But deep down, I knew better.

Our symmetry wasn't built on love. It was built on memory—on everything he had put me through, the very things he was trying to forget and make up for. Our new arrangement reframed our bond—what remains when the fire burns out but the smoke refuses to clear. We were surviving on residual intimacy, two people bound by the wreckage of what had transpired between us, learning to live in the echo.

Chapter Fifty-Three

It had been years since that house party on Bayshore with Keith. I still remembered him: Charlie. The beautiful man with the Asian eyes and the bag of party favors. The one who followed me into the bathroom, to share some of what he brought and to inspect me more closely away from the kinetic bodies in the other room. We didn't talk much. We didn't need to. But I remember the feeling of déjà vu that both unsettled and exhilarated me, a knowing that he wasn't like everyone—or anyone—else.

After that, he became a flicker at the edges of my life. Every few years, I'd catch sight of him across a dance floor—always moving, always lit by strobe or smoke, always with someone else. Sometimes a woman, sometimes a man. Sometimes laughing, sometimes lost. Our eyes would meet, just long enough to remember.

There was always that spark—recognition, longing, something unnamed. Then the moment would dissolve, the night would pull us apart, and I'd tell myself it was nothing. Just bad timing. Just life.

But some people don't just drift in and out of your world. They orbit it, drawing closer each time until the pull becomes impossible to resist.

So, when I saw him again that night at Rascals, it didn't feel like chance. It felt like gravity.

I was high on cocaine and ecstasy. I was dancing—barely standing, actually—when we saw each other again, the passage of time doing nothing to stop the momentum of our collision.

Rascals wasn't glamorous. It was a dive bar on the wrong side of Martin Luther King Blvd. The walls were dark, the lights too bright in some corners and burnt out in others. But people loved it anyway—bartenders who knew your drink before you ordered, drag queens chain-smoking by the DJ booth, and good music loud enough to intensify the high.

One of my best friends, Kirk Bocker, the youngest of a legendary Tampa clan of siblings, was beside me, laughing, eyes half-closed, lost in the haze with me.

By this time, years of transformation had refined me into a hyper-realistic version of a centerfold sprung to life—nose reshaped, jawline sharpened but feminine, curves sculpted, breasts a full 34DD. I was at my apex, full-formed tenfold—the Sophia/Raquel they whispered about.

Our eyes met. Kirk was already steering me toward the door, ready to move on to the next club.

But Charlie wasn't having it. He stepped in front of me, never looking away. His dark, almond-shaped eyes bore into me—those incredible eyes I could never shake—framed by lashes too long for a man, giving him a rare and exotic kind of beauty.

There was no need to acknowledge the years lost or name what this was in words. We knew.

I could see he was rolling too.

The music pulled us closer until our bodies found the rhythm, and the rest of the room disappeared. His hands grazed my hips, my fingers slipped around his neck, and for a moment, it was as if everything—every version of us—had been leading to this single point in time.

That night, we danced as if the world around us didn't exist—high on ecstasy and each other.

He was the most magnetic man I'd ever known. Every movement pulled me closer; every glance said remember. When he kissed me—really kissed me, took my mouth like it was his to claim—I trembled in a way that felt foreign, dangerous, true.

His body pressed against mine, hard and unyielding. He teased me, let me feel the length of him through denim, the heat of his breath against my neck.

"Take me home," I whispered. "Make love to me."

He drew back, eyes dark, voice low. "You want me to make love to you?"

His words brushed my skin as he leaned in, whispering in my ear, teeth grazing softly. The music. The ecstasy. The weight of his body. I wanted him with a craving so deep it bordered on madness.

He kissed my throat, his voice rough. "If I make love to you tonight, I'm not leaving tomorrow. I don't want a one-night stand."

I looked at him—really looked—and felt something inside me surrender. "Neither do I."

He took my hand and led me out of the club.

By the time we reached my apartment, the ecstasy had begun to fade, but the pull between us hadn't. He had more, but we didn't need it.

We fell into each other, a tangle of breath and want, skin against skin—everything that had been missing in our lives suddenly ours for the taking. He was completely at ease with me—no hesitation, no questions—his hands mapping every inch, his mouth tracing the edges of who I'd become.

When it was over, I lay against his chest, his strong arms cradling me tightly, his heart steady beneath my ear, and thought, *This is the one*. This is the one I will love forever.

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I woke to the morning sun stretching across the room, bright but forgiving. The room was still, the kind of quiet that feels deliberate, as if the world itself had paused to let us catch our breath.

He was beside me, half-awake, his arm still around me, his skin warm and solid against mine. There was no rush to move, no need to fill the silence. After the chaos of the night—the music, the drugs, the intensity of our lovemaking—this stillness felt warranted.

I turned toward him. He was looking at me, eyes soft, mouth curved in a sleepy half-smile. No performance. No pretense. Just him.

"You know," he said quietly, "you've always been right here."

He touched his temple. Then he placed his hand over his heart. "And right here."

Something in my chest tightened. The words weren't rehearsed. They weren't romantic. They were real—simple, steady, the way truth sounds when it's finally spoken aloud.

"I used to see you," he went on, "every few years, out somewhere... and I'd think, there she is. How do I make her mine?"

I didn't know what to say, so I didn't speak. I just watched him, memorizing the way the morning light framed the overwhelming beauty of his face, the small lines at the corners of his eyes, the tenderness there.

For once, I didn't feel the need to define what we were or where this was going. Some things don't ask to be named.

They just are.

Chapter Fifty-Four

In the beginning, it was all heat. We didn't ease into love—we collided, full force, like two people who'd been waiting too long for the other to appear. There were no boundaries, just desire and devotion that neither of us could pull away from.

Charlie was magnetic in ways that went beyond beauty. There was an all too familiar pulse in him I recognized—reckless, hungry, alive. Like me. Everything about him excited me, even the things that should have given me pause. I'd never been so loved—or so undone.

But passion like that doesn't stay contained. It spreads. It consumes.

And then came the nights that didn't end—when his eyes went glassy, when his voice turned sharp, when I could feel him slipping somewhere I couldn't follow. I told myself it was nothing. Just another long night. Just another high. But even then, I knew—love like ours could lift you, yes. But it could just as easily pull you under.

Charlie had been in a bad accident years earlier—hit by a truck on a rain-slick road. He'd survived, barely. But something in him had never fully healed. Not his spirit. Not his body.

He suffered from a condition called priapism—a prolonged and often painful erection that wouldn't go away on its own. Sometimes it lasted hours. Sometimes, longer. And when it did, there was only one solution: the emergency room.

The first time it happened, I thought he was exaggerating. Then I saw his face—ashen, jaw locked, body rigid with pain. We drove to the ER in silence, the hum of the streetlights blurring past us like ghosts. Inside, nurses moved quickly, speaking in low, practiced tones. They gave him injections of neosynephrine, straight into the shaft of his penis—a medication meant to constrict blood vessels and bring relief.

He gripped my hand until his knuckles went white, eyes wet with agony. I'd seen men cry before, but never like that. Never with shame and pain tangled so tightly they were indistinguishable.

By the time it was over, he was trembling, drenched in sweat. I helped him dress, smoothed his hair, kissed his forehead. The nurses looked at me with a kind of weary sympathy. I wasn't the first woman to stand beside a man like this. But in that moment, it felt like no one had ever done it before.

We left the hospital in silence, the sun just starting to rise. He reached for my hand and whispered, "I'm sorry."

I shook my head.

"Don't be."

Because I wasn't. Not yet.

In the beginning, love like ours still felt like grace.

The Internet Years and Its Aftermath

Chapter Fifty-Five

As our relationship progressed, the soft mornings would greet us, the sunlight spilling across the apartment's polished floors and surfaces. The scent of the lemon and sea salt candles I burned the night before mixing with Cuban coffee. This was my space, but our refuge from the world.

Charlie would be in the kitchen, barefoot, hair still mussed from sleep, a record playing low—Portishead most mornings, sometimes Sade. He cooked like he painted, without hesitation or recipe, each movement precise and sure. The scent of peppers and olive oil would draw me from bed, where I'd find him at the stove, plating breakfast as if it were art.

He'd look up and smile, that lopsided grin that felt like sunlight breaking. I'd sit on the counter, watching him move—this man who could turn the simplest thing into something worth remembering.

After we ate, we'd return to the bedroom. He'd stretch out beside me, eyes growing heavy. I loved him most in those quiet hours—his breathing even, his face unguarded, the wildness gone. Sometimes he'd wake before me, just to watch, whispering that he didn't understand how anyone could ever be so beautiful.

Those early days flowed like that—easy, measured, full of small rituals. He painted; I read or worked on the website. Music drifted between rooms. The world outside faded, replaced by our own quiet covenant.

For a while, it was perfect. We shared an impenetrable closeness, a beautiful thing yet to be broken.

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At night, the stillness changed.

The same man who moved with ease through morning light grew restless after dark. There were dinners that turned into drinks, drinks that turned into plans, and plans that ended long after sunrise. It was never

supposed to spiral, but the rhythm of our life began to bend toward excess—just one more glass, one more line, one more night that went on too long.

Sometimes I went with him. Sometimes I stayed home, candles burning low, the music looping on the stereo. When he was out, I told myself he needed it—the noise, the attention, the escape. He always came back, eyes bright, voice soft, sliding into bed as if nothing had happened.

But the mornings after were different. He'd cook with too much energy, talk too fast, kiss me like he was chasing something he'd lost in the dark. I started to notice the tremor in his hands when he painted, the way he'd disappear into the bathroom a little too often, the sweats and nausea that came when he couldn't refill his prescription on time.

Then the priapism flare-ups returned—sharper, more frequent, harder to ignore. What had once passed in hours now stretched into days. The pain came quicker, the recovery slower. I learned to read the signs: the shift in his breathing, the way his eyes would dart away when it started.

We were back in the emergency room before long, the staff already familiar with his name. I sat beside him while he clenched his jaw, trying not to let the pain swallow him. The cocaine made it worse; we both knew it, but neither of us said a word.

Later, his specialist said what we already feared—that the condition was worsening, that a decision would have to be made if he wanted relief. Surgery on his penis was mentioned, carrying a risk of impotency before the age of thirty, and Charlie shut down. He waved it off, muttered that he'd think about it, and turned to me with that half-smile that asked for understanding.

I nodded, pretending not to be afraid.

We drove home in silence, the morning sky just beginning to lighten. I lit a candle when we walked in. He poured a drink. Neither of us could speak about it.

In the weeks that followed, I tried to bring back our rhythm.

I cooked more, lit candles earlier, kept the apartment filled with music and light. I told myself that if everything looked beautiful, maybe it would feel that way again. He painted when he could, but the bursts of energy grew shorter, the crashes harder. Sometimes he'd sit on the floor in front of the canvas, brush in hand, staring at colors he couldn't bring himself to use.

When the pain came, I stayed close. I learned how to help him breathe through it, how to keep the room cool and quiet, how to wait until his body released its grip. I even learned how to inject the neosynephrine into his

penis myself, a devastating ritual that took the wind out of me every time. After, I'd change the sheets, wipe his forehead, make tea he rarely drank.

He'd apologize sometimes, voice small, eyes downcast. I'd tell him not to. That we were fine. That it would pass. But the words felt thinner each time.

Nights grew quieter. The phone stopped ringing. Friends drifted away. The world beyond our walls began to feel distant, almost imagined. I barely noticed the seasons changing, only the hours—measured in medicine, meals, and the soft hum of the stereo playing through the dark.

He slept more. I worked from the sofa, laptop open beside a half-empty glass of wine, watching the candlelight flicker across his face. There were moments when he looked peaceful again, the way he did in those first mornings.

And I would think, this is love.

Chapter Fifty-Six

It happened again, worse than before.

The pain hit in the middle of the night. Nothing helped—not the ice, not the medication, not my hands trying to soothe what couldn't be soothed. By morning, his breathing was shallow, his skin clammy. I called the doctor myself. Within the hour, we were back under fluorescent lights, the beeping monitors marking time louder than our words.

They admitted him this time.

The days blurred together—hallways, paperwork, soft voices behind curtains. I learned the schedule of the nurses, which ones to ask for, which ones to avoid. I brought him books he never opened, music he was too tired to hear. Mostly, I sat by his bed, waiting for the pain to settle, for his eyes to soften back into the man I knew.

It was on the third day that his mother appeared.

Jillian swept into the room with the composure of someone who had seen worse and refused to flinch. She was elegant—hair pulled back, pearls, an Armani suit pressed to perfection. Her voice carried authority, the kind that made people move without thinking.

I stood when she entered. She didn't ask who I was. She knew.

For a moment, we just looked at each other. It struck me then—the resemblance. The same dark eyes, the same quiet poise. Later, people would mistake us for mother and daughter when we were out together. There was a tangible physical likeness, but it was more than that—something in the way we held ourselves, the same self-possessed energy, the same calm that hid the storm.

She went straight to his bedside, smoothing his hair back, pressing a hand to his cheek. "You look tired," she said softly, not unkind.

Jillian's gaze returned to me, assessing, curious. Then she extended her hand. "You must be Sophia."

I nodded. "It's good to finally meet you."

Her grip was firm, cool. "Thank you for staying with him."

There was no judgment in her tone, but no sentimentality either. Just fact. Gratitude delivered like business. Still, something unspoken passed between us—recognition, maybe, or the quiet knowledge that we both loved him, each in our own way, each paying for it differently.

We talked little that day. She took the chair opposite mine, reading through charts, making notes, asking questions. I watched her move, precise and calm, and understood where Charlie had learned his grace—and his distance.

When night fell, she stood to leave, pausing at the door. "Get some rest," she said. "You look like you need it."

I didn't argue. I was exhausted.

As she disappeared down the hall, I turned back to him. His eyes were closed, his breathing even, the room washed in the dim light of monitors and machines.

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The days passed. Ten in all.

Each morning, I arrived early, coffee in hand, the scent of vanilla still clinging to my skin from the shower. I'd sit beside Charlie's bed, smoothing the blanket, reading aloud from whatever magazine or book I'd brought. He'd listen, eyes half-closed, grateful just to have someone near.

By afternoon, Jillian would appear—impeccable as ever, her lipstick precise, the faintest trace of perfume marking her presence before she spoke. At first, our exchanges were formal. She asked polite questions, listened carefully, never betraying much emotion. But with each passing day, the distance softened.

She began bringing flowers, arranging them herself in glass vases near the window. Once, she surprised us both with lunch from the café downstairs—real food, not the trays the hospital sent. She ate with us, laughing lightly at something Charlie said, her eyes catching mine with the smallest hint of warmth.

There were quiet afternoons when the three of us sat together, the television low, sunlight spilling across the linoleum. I'd catch her watching him—pride and pain mingling behind her calm exterior. And sometimes, when she thought I wasn't looking, she'd glance at me with something almost maternal.

By the end of the week, it felt natural when she placed a hand on my shoulder, or asked if I'd gotten enough rest. Charlie noticed, of course. It pleased him—the peace between us, the sense of family forming in a place meant for recovery.

When he was finally discharged, we left together—the three of us stepping out into the brightness of late afternoon, the world feeling almost new.

That evening, Jillian invited us to her penthouse on Bayshore Boulevard. The elevator opened onto marble floors and a wall of glass overlooking the bay, sunlight scattered across the water like coins. The space was elegant, curated, alive with art and fresh flowers. It looked exactly as I'd imagined—orderly, refined, touched by her hand in every corner.

We sat in her living room as she poured drinks—gin for her, whiskey for Charlie, wine for me. She asked about my work, my family, my life before all this. I told her what I could. She listened, eyes steady, nodding as if weighing each word.

Later, we went to Bern's for dinner. The hostess greeted her by name. Heads turned when she entered, and deference followed her through the room. Jillian was a star in Tampa—respected, admired, the kind of woman whose presence drew attention without effort. She'd spent decades in commercial real estate, shaping neighborhoods, leaving her mark one property at a time. Now, she was overseeing a new project—a mixed-use town center that promised to change the landscape of the city once again.

Charlie watched her with admiration, his pride unmistakable. I did too. There was something magnetic about her, a grace that came from knowing exactly who she was and how far she'd come.

Over dessert, she reached for my hand. "You've been good to my son," she said. "That means something to me."

I met her gaze and nodded. "I love him."

Her smile was small but real. "I can see that."

When the check came, she waved it away with practiced ease. The waiter thanked her by name.

Later, as we stepped out into the night, I could see the lights of downtown shimmering in the distance. Jillian's sleek Mercedes waited, the valet already holding the door. She kissed Charlie's cheek, then mine.

"Let's do this again soon," she said.

It was more than an invitation. It felt like family.

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For a while, life settled into something that looked like normalcy.

Charlie regained his strength, painting again in long, focused stretches, the light in his studio returning with him. I worked steadily on the website, keeping our days orderly and calm. We cooked together, walked along Bayshore at dusk, had quiet weekends on Redington Beach, where he grew up. There was a softness to that season—a mix of recovery and routine. Even the nights felt gentler, the edges smoothed by time and care.

Jillian visited often. She'd stop by for coffee or dinner, bringing fresh flowers or wine, something small for the kitchen—a new set of linen napkins, a crystal bowl she thought would suit the table. She was endlessly gracious, her curiosity wrapped in tact.

I could tell she was impressed—my apartment, my car, my clothes, the quiet order of my life. But she never asked directly where my money came from. She didn't need to. Charlie had already explained that I ran an online business, and she seemed content to let that answer stand.

If she ever suspected more, she kept it to herself. Jillian was too refined to pry, too pragmatic to disturb what appeared to be working. She saw the way I cared for him, the steadiness I brought to his life, and perhaps that was all she needed to know.

There were nights when the three of us would share dinner on her terrace, the city glittering in front of us. Conversation flowed easily—stories, laughter, moments of quiet understanding. The world outside felt far away, and I could almost believe this version of us might last forever.

Chapter Fifty-Seven

The internet was still the Wild West back then—a lawless frontier of half-built dreams. A lot of people still didn't fully understand what it was, only that it existed and it was rewriting everything we knew about technology.

While I was playing house with Charlie, business was thriving. Each new photoshoot brought another month of incalculable revenue. The audience was growing in ways I could feel but not yet see.

Then something happened that changed everything.

One of the first sets I'd ever released—known online to purveyors of trans adult imagery as *The Girl in the Hay*—had built the foundation of my brand. It drew subscribers, steady traffic, and helped curious wanderers find their way to me.

Then one morning, my inbox exploded. Traffic spiked so hard the servers collapsed, throwing errors and blank screens to anyone who tried to log on. My IT team called in a panic—thousands of new hits, all at once, more than the system had ever seen.

By the end of the day, we found out why.

The entire set had been stolen—ripped from my website, duplicated without consent, and scattered across the web like candy. The images landed on message boards, free sites, forums I'd never heard of. Each link carried my name, my face, my body—shared and reshared by people who had no idea where it came from, only that they wanted more.

At first, I was furious. It felt like a violation, a theft of something I'd made with care and control. But anger gave way to something else—a dawning realization that I was *everywhere*. My name was on the lips of people I'd never met, my image threaded through a network too vast to contain.

Before anyone called it a *viral moment*, I was living it.

For forty-eight hours, the site was down while the team scrambled to accommodate the surge. New servers, new bandwidth, new infrastructure.

Every time we thought we'd stabilized, the traffic spiked again—thousands of visitors, hundreds of emails, the numbers multiplying by the hour.

When the site finally came back online, the world was watching. By the end of the year, I was The Most Downloaded Transsexual Model on the Internet, and we were doing numbers Andrew and I couldn't wrap our heads around.

Raquel Reyes was a sensation. An online superstar. One of the very first. It was the beginning of one era. And the end of another.

Chapter Fifty-Eight

It all looked perfect from the outside.

The business was thriving. *Raquel*, the image, was everywhere—mirrored across screens, mentioned in forums, whispered about on message boards. I was on the cover of magazines around the country—and then, in select magazines around the world.

I spent my mornings in meetings, my afternoons approving edits, my nights reviewing content. The hum of the computer had become its own kind of heartbeat, steady and constant. Even when I shut it down, the glow seemed to linger in the room.

At home, Charlie and I moved through the same space but different worlds. He painted less. Slept more. Some days, I'd find him on the balcony, staring out at the city like he was waiting for something to appear. When I asked what he was thinking, he'd just smile and say, *"Nothing you need to worry about."*

I wanted to believe him.

But the distance between us was starting to show. Little things at first—the quiet pauses, the long nights, the moments when our eyes didn't meet. He'd retreat into his thoughts; I'd retreat into work. We'd still come together in bed, still hold each other close, but even that felt like remembering something we'd once been, not living it.

While *Raquel Reyes* was ascending, *we* were unraveling.

I told myself it was temporary—that success required sacrifice, that love could wait, that once the next launch was done, the next shoot approved, I'd find my way back to him.

But somewhere between the uploads and the deadlines, I started to realize: the more the world saw me, the less he did.

Chapter Fifty-Nine

The condo on Rocky Point felt like a new beginning.

Glass walls opened to the bay, light shifting across the water. Every window held a view — sailboats gliding past, the skyline glimmering in the distance. It was quiet there, insulated from the city. Our neighbors were traveling executives, Buccaneers players, people who smiled politely in the breezeway before disappearing behind identical doors.

I told myself a new space would mean a new start.

I decorated every room carefully—cream fabrics, fresh flowers, deep Italian leather couches and modern tables. The air smelled of apple cinnamon, everything arranged perfectly so, as if order could heal chaos.

But nothing changed.

The cycle began again—long stretches of calm followed by sudden vanishings. He'd disappear for days, no call, no trace, just a silence that swallowed the rooms whole. Then, as suddenly as he'd gone, he'd return—hollow-eyed, trembling, the smell of sweat and smoke clinging to his skin.

The first day back, he'd crash—sleeping in fits, mumbling apologies, reaching for me with hands that shook. By the second day, he'd start to come apart — feverish, restless, haunted by whatever ghosts had followed him home. By the third, the storm would pass, leaving him soft and broken, swearing he'd change.

And then it would start again.

One night, it got bad.

He came home wild, eyes unfocused, words slurred. I tried to calm him, but he was already somewhere I couldn't reach. The argument started small, as they always did, and then caught fire. In a flash, he was throwing things, shouting, pacing the room like a man trapped in his own body.

I'd seen enough.

I told him to leave.

At first, he refused—stunned, then angry, then pleading. When I locked the door, I heard him slide down against it, his voice breaking on the other side.

He whimpered like a child, begging me to let him in.

I stood there, back pressed against the wood, tears streaking my face, listening to him cry.

It was the sound of someone drowning—and the terrible knowing I could not save him.

Chapter Sixty

One afternoon, I sat on the couch, sorting through the last set of photos I had taken, and he was in them.

I sipped a vodka tonic, going over the first interactive couple's shoot I'd ever done for my website. It was a highly anticipated and monumental release, shot by the renowned photographer Billy the Kid.

The images glowed on the screen, alive with heat and fervor. Charlie looked incredible—every cut of his beautiful face and body rendered in shadow. His cock—large, proud, and perfect—the alter of his pleasure, and the source of his suffering.

In one perfect frame, I'm kneeling in obedience. My eyes are closed in ecstasy, my mouth tugging at the leather covering his crotch—his cock thick beneath it, alive and straining. It's a moment of worship —the goddess on her knees, honoring the man whose body was betraying him, but who had given her passion, protection, and the illusion of forever.

It wasn't just desire that lived in those images—it was the residue of us—of him—dissolving.

And I stared at the pictures—at him—in wonder, trying to understand where it all went wrong. How could something that burned so bright end like this?

Chapter Sixty-One

There's a certain rhythm to loving an addict. You forgive, you forget, you start again. You tell yourself this time will be different, that love will be the thing that saves them. You learn to read silence like weather, to brace for the storm and pretend the calm is enough.

Each apology sounds like a promise. Each relapse feels like an accident. And because you remember who they were before—the light in their eyes, the laughter, the sweetness that surfaces between the chaos—you keep believing you can bring them back.

You give second chances. Then thirds. Then sevenths. You call it love, but really, it's survival—a desperate attempt to hold together the pieces of a person who can't stop breaking.

The seasons pass that way, one blending into the next. Spring apologies, summer calm, autumn distance, winter collapse. You lose track of time because every day is a variation of the same. The flowers on the table, the smell of his skin, the sound of the door closing—all of it becomes a loop you can't escape.

And slowly, love changes shape. What began as devotion becomes endurance. The forgiveness you offer—over and over, without question—begins to hollow you out, one mercy at a time.

And still, you stay. Because love isn't rational. It's memory. It's hope. It's the promise of something whispered in better light.

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I never could let Charlie go. Not really. I loved him too much.

I held on for a long time—taking him back, throwing him out, taking him back again—until the repetition of it began to feel normal. Like breathing.

He was contemplating the surgery. The pain from the priapism had become unbearable.

By then, he was addicted to OxyContin—crushing the pills, snorting them in secret.

One afternoon, I came home from the gym and found him asleep on the couch. The sun was pouring through the open doors, a cool breeze drifting in from the bay.

I stood there watching him for a long time—his hair stirring in the wind, his body shivering from the chill. Still, he slept.

And I gazed at him with longing and awe, marveling at his beauty, and feeling something deep in my soul I couldn't explain.

Chapter Sixty-Two

One morning, I woke up, and it felt like old times.

He was himself again—bright, lovely, laughing.

I had a photo shoot later that day, and he sat with me as I gathered my bikinis and dresses, offering advice on what he thought would work and what to leave behind.

I caught him looking at me—not casually, but with something that felt like reverence.

"Why are you looking at me like that?" I asked.

He paused, and in a way I'll never forget—a way that still haunts me to this day—he said,

"I'm just remembering."

I reached out for him, and he pulled me close.

He was sitting, I was standing, and he pressed his head against my stomach. I ran my fingers through his thick hair, holding him there for a while.

And in the smallest voice, he said,

"Thank you."

I felt a kind of hope, the fragile kind that always surfaced when his light returned.

I left for my photo shoot that day, and when I returned, he was gone.

I tried to reach him, but I couldn't. He had disappeared again. It hurt, but by then, I was used to it.

Jason was in town for his birthday, and I went out with him to try and forget. I stayed out all night, drifted to a house party after the club closed, but couldn't find the energy to keep going.

By dawn, I returned to my apartment. It was quiet, safe, perfect. The morning was breaking, and the sun was rising over the bay.

As I started to undress, my phone rang. It was Jillian's assistant, Mary.

I don't remember what she said exactly, only the intent of her call and the gravity of what it meant.

I dropped the phone and sank to the floor.

And then I screamed—a sound of such pain and anguish, so loud, that my neighbor came to see what was happening.

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Charlie died quietly, in his sleep.

Several factors contributed to his death, but in the end, it all came down to dangerous living and a soul that simply wore out.

I went to his studio in Hyde Park. The police and paramedics were already there when I arrived. I stood beside Jillian as they removed his body, and I could feel the literal breaking of my heart.

I stood in the doorway, looking at the remnants of his life scattered and strewn about.

Next to the daybed he used to crash on when he wasn't in our bed was a framed poster of me, eye level. He always said it was his favorite photograph of me.

Jillian told me later that when they found him, his body was turned in that direction—as if remembering.

Charlie was twenty-nine years old when he died.

There are some people you never forget. He is one of them.

Chapter Sixty-Three

St. Regis, Los Angeles — January 2000

I began the first few days of 2000 in Los Angeles, in a fog of cash and bad decisions.

I'd been up—and high—for three straight days when the drugs finally stopped working. The city outside the window shimmered under a pale winter haze, but the air inside was tainted by too much perfume and the chemical bite of something burning. Across the suite, she sat cross-legged on the bed—one of *them*, a Vivid Girl. The kind of woman men whispered about in studios and clubs, part goddess, part commodity, a porn star with a name the world knew.

The Vivid Girls were the rarified ones—the celebrity sirens of an industry built on illusion, photographed like fashion models, dating rock stars, living in mansions in the hills. They were spoken about in the language of the time — *"girls"* as a brand, though every one of them was a woman, fully formed, owning her image and her fame.

She'd hired me herself, at the behest of her client.

Day One — Arrival

The suite smelled like Dior and dollars. He was already there —tall, tanned, gleaming —a plastic surgeon to the stars, he had pulled and rebuilt half of Beverly Hills and had the billboards on Sunset to prove it.

He liked things beautiful and broken. That's why we were there.

The first night was champagne and tease. The Vivid Girl slipped into lingerie worth more than most people's rent, her skin shining under the chandeliers. He fed her lines off a glass table, pressed hundred-dollar bills into my hand, kissed my neck, told me I was perfect when he saw me fully naked in all of my glory.

I told myself I was fine. I always did.

Day Two — The High

The music never stopped. Neither did we.

By the second day, the suite had transformed—a shrine to excess. The air was thick with smoke, surfaces littered with glassware, mirrors fogged by fingerprints and lines of white. Dresses lay draped across chairs, underwear scattered like confetti.

He wanted to play director.

We became his cast—actresses in a film that would never screen, performing pleasure in careful sequence. Positions, angles, sighs. The lens of his imaginary camera trembled with need. He circled us, whispering cues, the words blurring into nonsense.

"Beautiful," he kept saying. "Perfect. Don't stop."

The Vivid Girl moved like water—precise, a practiced professional. She had done this before. Her gestures were smooth, efficient, her gaze unflinching.

I tried to follow her rhythm—to mirror her ease—but somewhere between the flash and the moan, I started to drift. My body complied, my mind detached. The light was too bright. The music too loud.

Time began to fold—hours, minutes, lines, lips—all dissolving into one endless reel.

He pressed a pill to my tongue. I didn't ask what it was.

By afternoon, the sunlight had turned spectral, slipping through the drapes in pale, unsteady strips. The city below no longer existed. Only this room did—this orbit of bodies, moans, and money.

We stopped eating. Stopped sleeping.

Once, I caught sight of myself in the mirrored wall—mascara faintly smudged, eyes vacant, expression unreadable. I looked like a photograph of someone I used to know.

He kissed my shoulder, murmured something about love. I laughed. Maybe he did too.

The music pulsed. The camera clicked. The room started spinning.

And then, as suddenly as it began, the high turned hollow.

Day Three — The Fall

I don't remember how many pills I took or exactly what I mixed, but the combination of ecstasy, GHB, and alcohol could have killed me.

The night had folded into morning; the hours into something shapeless. The music kept looping, softer now, like a heartbeat under water.

Then everything started to slide—the walls, the floor, the air. My vision tunneled. The sound dulled. The room tilted.

"Hey. Hey. Stay with me, Raquel."

His voice—sharp now, urgent. Hands on my shoulders, shaking me. Cold water on my face. My chest heaving, lungs fighting for air.

"Breathe. Come on, baby. Breathe."

And then, like surfacing from a dream, I did.

When I came to, the suite was still. The curtains were open now, light creeping through. My head throbbed; my heart felt too big for my ribs.

He was standing out on the balcony, phone pressed to his ear, the skyline of Los Angeles glittering behind him. His voice was low, composed, already negotiating something—a surgery, a dinner, a deal.

The sudden normalcy of it made me dizzy.

A few minutes ago, I'd been gone—breathless, blue, another statistic waiting to be tallied. And now he was back to work, as if near-death were just another indulgence to tidy away.

I sat up slowly, the sheet slipping from my shoulders. She was across the room, counting money—calm, deliberate, like someone who'd seen this before.

"You scared him," she said, lighting a cigarette. "That doesn't happen often."

I managed a faint laugh.

"You'll be fine," she added, softer this time. "You shouldn't have tried to keep up with him. No one can."

I showered. Got dressed. The residue of days we'd never get back hung in the air.

When I zipped my bag, it was heavier—ten thousand dollars in rolled bills, the price of three days I couldn't entirely remember.

At the door, she squeezed my hand.

"Take care of yourself, beautiful" she said.

I nodded.

By the time I reached the lobby, the city was wide awake — I stepped into the day and felt nothing at all.

Chapter Sixty-Four

For me, the early 2000s played out like one very long, lost weekend—a blur of flight itineraries, exclusive invitations, and back stage passes, a decade that began in the glow of morning and ended somewhere after last call.

There were indiscriminate liaisons and misadventures, lovers whose names I never learned, parties I never truly left. Nights bled into mornings, mornings into afternoons. Time slipped away.

Everywhere I went, I saw the ghost of him—Charlie—lingering, his voice drifting through hotel corridors, echoing off marble floors.

The men blurred together, too—actors in exile, athletes between contracts, musicians, surgeons, lawyers, the quietly rich. They wanted to be seen. I wanted to disappear. It worked out for everyone.

The money came fast. So did the attention. I learned to measure worth in retainer fees and room service tabs, the way some people count rosary beads—a ritual of devotion to the life I'd built and couldn't quite escape.

Tampa, Miami, Los Angeles, New York, New Orleans, Las Vegas—the cities shimmered, interchangeable and unreal, each VIP room promising some new beginning that never arrived.

There were nights I'd stare out from glass balconies, whatever city I was in stretching beneath me in a grid of light—all those windows glowing, all those lives being lived. I told myself I belonged up there, above it all. But the truth was quieter. Lonelier. I was chasing a pulse I couldn't feel, moving from skyline to skyline, waiting for something—anything—to break through the numbness.

I told myself I was living. And in a way, I was.

I had become the fantasy, but what I really wanted was to feel alive again.

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It was around that time Liza came back into my life.

I'd see her sometimes before—across a crowded bar, at the edge of a dance floor, her laughter cutting through the smoke and sound. She'd raise a glass, I'd nod, and we'd drift back into our separate lives.

After Charlie died, she reached out. A phone call first, then a visit.

I remembered her from another life—back in Key West, when I was still a slip of a boy, running wild with Ricky through the streets, sunburned and laughing, the kind of beauty that made strangers stare. The woman standing in front of me now was all edges and ease—hair slicked back, gold hoops, a whisper of danger in her smile.

She didn't ask how I was. She just said, "You need to get out of here. Let's go to my house in Key West for a while."

And she was right.

Liza knew how to make grief disappear—not with comfort, but with distraction. Her love of cocaine was legendary; her capacity for chaos, unmatched. We became inseparable—two women moving in sync through the blur, chasing anything that kept the silence away.

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My friendship with Liza unfolded like a reel of borrowed time—sleepless, blurred, decadent. We lived as if dawn was something we could outrun.

There were late nights in Key West dive bars, the two of us pressed into cracked vinyl booths, laughing over rum punches and terrible decisions, while the jukebox played sad songs we swore we didn't believe in.

In Miami, we dressed to kill and dined at The Forge and Joe's Stone Crab—candlelight flickering over caviar and champagne, mirrors catching our reflections in fragments. Men sent bottles, whispered offers, names we forgot before dessert.

In Tampa, the pace never slowed. Endless nights at The Palm and Donatello's, lost afternoons at City Side, The Hideaway, and The Hub—days that glowed even when they were unraveling.

One year, we went to Buenos Aires for a while. We wandered aimlessly through the cobblestone streets, nights thick with tango and heat. We boarded a boat to Uruguay on a whim, crossing the water at sunset, wind tangling our hair, the sky streaked gold and violet.

Our friendship was a feverish fantasy of motion and indulgence—parties, planes, blow, and everything burning bright and fast. Sometimes, it felt like we were the last two left from a world already fading—half in love with the memory of who we used to be, half afraid to face what we had become.

Chapter Sixty-Five

By the time I met Beth, an unusual detour in a life already full of inconsistencies, I was up for anything.

She was a stylist at BellaDonna in Hyde Park—all glossy hair and quiet confidence. She was dating an old friend of mine, David—someone I'd partied and played with years before.

We crossed paths one evening in Ybor City at Twilight, and when I stopped by the salon a few days later, we fell into easy conversation. She was warm, beautiful, and sexy—the kind of woman whose presence felt like sunlight after too many sleepless nights.

One night, after rolling with her, David, and another friend, Drew, the four of us ended up in bed together. It started as laughter, a tangle of limbs and music, bodies moving without thought or hesitation. After much playful frolicking with the boys, our attention shifted—and suddenly, it was just us.

It felt intimate, electric—as if the others weren't even there. She was an incredible kisser, and I was completely undone by her softness, by the way she touched me, by how she seemed to understand exactly what I needed without a word.

It was the beginning of our lost summer together, weeks unfolding—fast cars, warm nights, and laughter that carried across parking lots at 2 a.m.

Beth loved movement—driving with the top down, hair wild, music up. We'd cruise Bayshore at midnight, headlights slicing through the darkness, our hands brushing across the console, a silent language of touch and tease. Some nights we'd end up at an after-hours club or rave, dancing until our dresses were damp with sweat. Other nights, we'd slip into rooftop bars, order martinis we didn't need, and flirt with strangers we'd never see again.

She brought out a different version of me—lighter, looser, still tender from the wreckage but hungry to feel something new. With her, I remembered how it felt to laugh, to dance just because the song demanded it, to be wanted for who I was and not for what I could give.

For a while, we lived like that. And when our summer ended, there was no regret or sorrow, only the afterglow. She was the only woman in my life, and remains a friend to this day.

Chapter Sixty-Six

That winter, I went with David to Monte Carlo. He was older now, sober, and gentler. His ache to possess me had faded, replaced by something steadier—devotion without demand. He knew I would never belong to him, not in the way he once imagined. And yet he stayed, content with proximity, grateful for whatever part of me I could offer. In return, he took care of me financially. I still saw clients—not because I had to, but because it gave me a sense of control, in some strange way.

We stayed at the Hôtel de Paris for several days before moving on to Provence. For weeks, we wandered through France, settling into an unspoken understanding.

One afternoon, I stood on the terrace of our suite at the Château Eza on the Côte d'Azur. The sea stretched out below like a sheet of glass, the light breaking into a kaleidoscope of colors where it touched the waves. I had never seen anything so beautiful. I thought of Charlie. For a moment, I imagined him there with me—the sun on his face, the wind in his hair. But the vision dissolved as quickly as it came. Beauty couldn't bring him back, and love, at least the kind we shared, had no place in this stillness.

Behind me, the door opened softly. David stepped out onto the balcony, a cup of coffee in his hand. "What are you thinking about?" he asked.

I smiled, eyes still on the horizon. "I'm thinking about life, actually. How far I've come from..." My voice trailed off.

"From what?"

I didn't answer. Instead, I reached for his hand and gave it a gentle squeeze. "Thank you for bringing me here."

He brushed his thumb against my skin, his touch light, familiar. "Anytime," he said.

There was a softness in his eyes I'd seen before, a quiet hope he no longer put into words. He wanted love, but knew better than to ask. We'd made peace with what we were, but sometimes, in gestures like this, I could still feel the shadow of what he wished for.

As for me, I no longer questioned our relationship. I'd released the memories of our past and accepted our current arrangement for what it was—a détente between two people who had spent years giving and taking from each other.

Chapter Sixty-Seven

The room was quiet. Afternoon light spilled through the blinds in thin, golden stripes. My therapist sat across from me, posture open and still, listening as I began to unpack the story of my life.

I'd spent a lifetime in motion—cities, lovers, names—but here, the road behind me finally came into view. I told her everything—memories I'd carried like contraband, stories I'd sealed shut.

I spoke of the moment light first found me—how, somewhere between girl and ghost, I began to realize that being seen could feel like safety, that my beauty—and the attention it drew—became its own kind of citadel.

I paused, the truth still strange in my mouth. She nodded gently, waiting for me to continue, pen gliding across the page, her gaze steady, unhurried.

What started as instinct grew into art.

Escorting came later, almost naturally, as if the world had been leading me there all along. It wasn't a fall; it was a coronation. A reclamation of my power—the power stolen from me as a child. Finally, I decided who could touch me, what they could take, what they would pay.

She wrote something then, a small movement of ink on paper, as I kept speaking.

What began as self-preservation blurred, almost imperceptibly, into performance. Power looked like freedom, but sometimes I wondered if I'd simply traded one disguise for another.

I told her about Charlie—beautiful, reckless Charlie—who saw through all of it to the real me and touched something honest and raw.

I shared with her for months—crying, laughing, remembering—unspooling the years like film from a reel, each frame a ghost, a lesson, a loss. And when our work together ended, she left me with a simple question that hovered over me with unrelenting clarity:

If survival is all I've ever known, what does it mean to live?

Chapter Sixty-Eight

The world was changing, faster than anyone could keep up. The internet—once a constellation of whispers, passwords, and hidden corners—was beginning to hum with noise. What had once felt like discovery now felt like exposure. Pages that used to load in silence now blinked with comment boxes and pop-ups asking for more. Everyone was learning how to perform.

My website still made money, though not the kind it used to. In the beginning, it had been enough to live beautifully—a single photograph could buy a month of freedom. But the mystery that made those images magnetic was losing its power. People didn't want fantasy anymore. They wanted access. They wanted to see everything, the more explicit the better.

The culture was shifting, tilting toward confession. Reality television was everywhere—cameras in houses, cameras on beaches, cameras in backseats and bathrooms. The new stars weren't actors or models; they were ordinary people who'd turned their lives inside out for the world to watch.

The more they revealed, the more they were rewarded. The idea of mystique—of being known but not seen—was suddenly out of fashion. Now, if you weren't oversharing, you were invisible.

Free content was flooding the internet. What had once been rare—a photograph, a moment, a look—was now everywhere, stripped of ceremony. Desire no longer had a price; it was a download. My generation of online sirens was becoming obsolete, replaced by girls who gave everything away for the currency of attention.

Somewhere in the noise, a new kind of world was forming—one where connection was measured in clicks, not closeness. The names sounded innocent enough: Friendster. LiveJournal. And soon, a site no one had heard of yet, but everyone would—Myspace. Facebook and Instagram were years away but the foundation was being laid with precision.

I could feel the ground shifting beneath me.

The art of being unreachable—my oldest form of power—was dissolving into air.

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I began thinking of ways to pivot.

I was still beautiful. I could still take a great picture.

But the illusion had lost its shine.

For months, I'd been journaling—a suggestion from my therapist, a way to keep the release alive after our sessions ended. What started as an exercise in relief became something deeper. I'd always been a writer at heart, shaped by my love of books and the stories that saved me. Slowly, through ink and memory, a narrative began to emerge—not the myth I'd performed, but the life I had lived.

I started sorting through boxes stacked in closets and corners—photographs, Polaroids, postcards, the brittle letters my parents once exchanged. I reread the notes Charlie sent me near the end of his life, his handwriting fragile but defiant. I studied the faces of friends who had come and gone, their smiles frozen in another time.

Piece by piece, I was assembling a record of my world—the places I'd wandered, the people I'd loved, the ghosts that still lingered in the margins. It all felt alive again.

As the pages filled, so did I. Each entry peeled back another layer, truth replacing performance, memory softening myth. Somewhere between the sentences, I began to see myself clearly for the first time: not the girl in the photographs, not the fantasy I had curated, but the woman who had lived through it all and somehow endured.

One night, on a whim, I opened a new document and typed three words: *This is me*. It was the beginning of my memoir—though I didn't call it that then. It was just my story, unfiltered and unadorned. A way to make sense of the years I had survived, the love I had lost, the beauty that had both protected and punished me. Writing became a ritual, a return.

And then, unexpectedly, love reached for me.

His name was Jim. We met by chance—a quiet but electric crossing of paths that neither of us could have planned. What began as conversation turned into laughter, then into something slower, softer, alive. There was no performance between us, no need to impress or pretend.

I was incredibly attracted to him. With him, intimacy wasn't an act; it was an awakening. There was a kindness in his eyes, an openness that disarmed me. What began as a one-night indulgence unfolded into something deeper—a connection rooted not in desire alone, but in recognition of my humanity.

For the first time since I lost Charlie, I allowed myself to kiss—passionately and completely—another man.

It felt strange.

And wonderful.

With Jim, I learned that tenderness could exist without transaction, that closeness could heal rather than consume. He didn't want to possess me. He wanted to know me.

What grew between us was quiet but certain, steady in a way that felt new.

After years of loving men who burned too bright, Jim was warmth—not fire. He didn't try to fix me, only to hold space for the woman I was becoming. In his presence, I could rest, breathe, and simply exist.

Our love grew and became the bedrock of my healing—not dramatic or all-consuming, but strong, constant, real. He helped gather the pieces of me I thought I'd lost forever, not by demanding I forget the past, but by reminding me that I had survived it.

With Jim, I learned that peace could be passionate, too.

That devotion didn't have to hurt to feel alive.

In his arms, I began to believe in softness again—in mornings without dread, in laughter that lingered, in love that stayed.

As I wrote, he listened. He never asked for the prettier version of my story. He wanted the truth—every jagged edge, every scar. And in telling it, I found myself again.

Eventually, we committed.

We built a life together on Siesta Key, in a beautiful home on the water that felt like our own piece of paradise. Days unfolded in golden light—mornings lingering in the hammock strung above our pool, afternoons swimming in the Gulf, salt on our skin and laughter in the air. Some evenings we'd take the boat out to Longboat, drop anchor, and make love beneath the stars, the world reduced to waves and breath and the steady pulse of the tide.

One year, we took off and wandered through Peru. We climbed Machu Picchu at dawn, mist rising like breath from the earth. We traced

the worn stones of ancient villages, listening to stories older than memory. From there, we journeyed deep into the Amazon, following the river as it curved through green infinity, to the place where the pink dolphins swim.

The trip was our communion, and alas, our swan song.

Love, even beautiful love, doesn't last forever. I learned never to hold too tight—and when it's time for someone to go, it's your duty to release them, whether you want to or not.

Eventually, Jim and I separated—not dramatically, not in pain or hurt or betrayal.

It was a quiet realization, tender and true, that what we shared had been perfect for a time, but not meant to last forever. He was a season in my life—and a deeply meaningful one.

I'll always remember those days as some of my happiest, most carefree.

And I'll always hold Jim in my heart, for countless, beautiful reasons.

Sometimes, I picture him surfing in Fiji or steering a boat beneath a wide, forgiving sky—older now, still handsome, and I hope, happy.

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After Jim and I separated, I stayed on Siesta Key for a while.

I'd grown accustomed to its island rhythm—slow mornings, salt on the air, nights that drifted easily into one another. I made friends, the kind who owned or worked in the restaurants and bars scattered through the tiny downtown. We'd share drinks after closing, swap stories, watch the tide roll in beneath a sky full of stars.

There were flings, too—brief, harmless entanglements that reminded me I was still desired, still beautiful.

Every so often, a friend would spot me tucked into a quiet corner, laughing softly with a handsome soap star or the tattooed drummer of an iconic '80s hair band—remnants of an old life slipping through the seams of my new one.

And sometimes, I'd catch their glance from across the room—the curiosity in their eyes, the unspoken question hovering there.

Who was I, really?

Chapter Sixty-Nine

Eventually, I could feel my wanderlust stirring again. The island had been kind to me, but the horizon was calling. It was time to move on.

David returned—never truly gone, just on hiatus while Jim and I lived out our love story. By now, he was accustomed to sharing me, even losing me for a while. It was a familiar pattern for both of us—distance, return, no excuses offered and no questions asked.

We set off for Europe, drifting between cities and seasons the way we always had. Somewhere along the journey, I told him I wanted to live in Savannah, GA. It was a place I'd loved for years, though I didn't know a soul there. Still, something about it called to me.

He thought it was a wonderful idea.

He offered to buy me a house.

I knew what it meant—his way of tethering us together again—but I didn't resist. I was getting older. I wanted a home, the steadiness of walls that were mine, the quiet security I had earned. I wanted a fresh start.

When we returned to America, we flew to Savannah and stayed for a while, wandering the cobblestone streets, visiting old homes framed by oaks and Spanish moss. The one we settled on stood in the heart of the historic district—a restored 1800s townhouse overlooking one of the city's shaded squares. It was elegant and full of light, its plaster walls hand-finished by master craftsmen.

It was perfect.

It cost nearly a million dollars.

He wrote a personal check for the down payment.

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Savannah revealed herself slowly, like a secret too beautiful to confess.

Every street was a jewel, every square a memory suspended in time. Spanish moss draped from the oaks like lace, veiling the city in a hush of green and gold. The air itself seemed perfumed with magnolia and jasmine.

It was a city of contradictions—genteel and ghostly, refined and restless. Beneath the charm of its verandas and wrought-iron balconies, you could feel the pulse of something older, stranger.

By day, the historic district gleamed in the heat—carriages rolling past painted shutters, shop windows glowing with antique light. By night, lanterns flickered in the fog, and distant music drifted through the squares, mingling with the rustle of leaves and the low hum of cicadas.

Savannah didn't just invite you in—she possessed you. She asked nothing, promised nothing, but if you listened closely, she'd reveal her secrets. I fell under her spell almost immediately.

The city seemed to understand women like me—those who had lived many lives, worn many names, and were ready, at last, to rest.

The locals welcomed me in ways that felt both familiar and fated: the bartender who saved my usual seat at The Olde Pink House; the florist at Garden on the Square who tucked extra sprigs of lavender into my weekly bouquet; the tour guide who swore he recognized me from a dream. They took me as I was.

And then there was The Lady Chablis—legendary, radiant, irreverent, untouchable. Already a star from her turn in *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil*, Savannah was her city. She belonged to it, and it to her—forever enshrined in the myth of American literature.

We met one evening at Club One, where she ruled the stage like a queen born of starlight and sass. When she learned my name, she smiled like she already knew the story.

"Well, baby," she drawled, eyes glinting like champagne, "You wouldn't be here if Savannah hadn't claimed you."

We became fast friends—kindred in ways words couldn't quite capture. Two trans women who had survived the spectacle, turned pain into performance, and still found room for grace. In her company, I learned the true rhythm of the city—its gossip, its glamour, its ghosts. She took me to hidden supper clubs and midnight soirées in old mansions, introducing me to artists, eccentrics, and dreamers.

Through her, and other friends I met there, I came to see Savannah not just as a place, but as a state of being—elegant, curated, unbothered by time.

A city where reinvention wasn't escape, but evolution.

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Sometimes, when the air grew heavy and the afternoons turned still, I wandered through Bonaventure Cemetery.

It wasn't morbid—not to me. It was beautiful.

The oaks there stood ancient and knowing, their limbs veiled in Spanish moss that swayed like slow dancers in the heat. Stone angels leaned toward the earth, their faces softened by time, their wings mottled by lichen and light. Paths curled and doubled back, winding through statues and graves, each name whispering from another century.

The place breathed—quiet, but alive. You could feel the weight of every life, every love, every longing carved into those stones.

I liked to walk there at dusk, when the sun burned low and the sky turned violet, when night birds began their slow requiem and the first stars appeared. Sometimes I'd bring flowers—magnolia, gardenia, something fragrant and fleeting—and leave them at the foot of a monument whose name I didn't know.

It wasn't grief that drew me, but kinship. These were souls who had lived through beauty and burden, who'd walked these same streets, carried their own secrets, loved fiercely, lost deeply. In their silence, I found a strange kind of comfort.

Savannah was full of ghosts, but they weren't haunting me.

They were keeping me company.

Chapter Seventy

The seasons changed, and Savannah became my sanctuary. In the quiet of my townhouse, surrounded by light and history, I finished my book.

Page by page, the story unfolded—an artifact, a testament. Every chapter was a reclamation, every sentence a confession. By the time I wrote the final line, I felt both emptied and empowered. The person I had been—all those names, all those cities, all those nights—finally had a voice. I had told the story no one else could. And because I told it, without shame and with ownership, no one could ever hold my past over me like a secret. Power, till the end.

When it was done, I printed a copy, bound it in ribbon, and placed it on the table beside a vase of fresh lilies and a novena candle. For a long time, I simply stared at it—the weight of it, the truth of it. My life, contained.

With the same determination that once carried me through survival, I began sending it out—to editors, to publishers, to anyone who might listen. Each envelope felt like an invocation, a message in a bottle cast into an ocean of strangers.

I was patient. Hopeful. I had learned that creation, like love, requires release.

One evening, months later, I drove to Atlanta for a concert—a night to celebrate, to be anonymous in a crowd, to let the noise drown out the stillness I'd lived in for so long. The venue pulsed with sound and light, the air charged with static anticipation.

I found my way to a reserved section near the stage—a quieter corner where I could breathe and just watch. That's where I met Anjin.

He was seated beside me, striking in a way that made the room take notice. We started talking—casual at first, then easy, then intimate—the kind of connection two strangers sometimes make when everything feels fated.

He told me he was a musician, nothing more. I didn't press. The world he played in—*aggrotech*—wasn't one I knew. His genre was foreign to me,

but his fame was very real. Girls wandered over from time to time, asking him for a photo.

When the concert ended, we lingered—neither of us quite ready to let go of what was forming between us. Outside, Atlanta was humming. He asked if I'd like to get a drink; I said, "Well, of course I would."

Hours later, we were tangled in the sheets of my hotel room. Our connection was immediate, physical, undeniable—the kind of passion that breaks through all the bullshit.

I didn't know his story, and he didn't ask for mine. In that moment, nothing existed but the pull between us—urgent and all-consuming.

It began like a secret and bloomed. Anjin invited me to join him on the road, and I said yes without thinking. Maybe I knew, even then, that this would be my last adventure of its kind—one more season of excess before the curtain call.

We drifted from city to city, shadows in motion—hotels, green rooms, afterparties blurring into one long neon streak. Some nights I stood backstage, watching the crowd throb and scream as he prowled the stage like something unholy and unhinged. He became a god under the lights—his voice a growl, his body a weapon, his beauty sharpened into raw spectacle.

And yet, offstage, he was soft—boyish, even. In the dim light of hotel rooms, he'd trace my shoulder with the back of his hand, hum old songs against my skin, talk about nothing and everything until dawn.

We made love furiously, like we were trying to burn the world down. We drank too much, slept too little, lived entirely inside the fever of it.

On the tour bus, I'd watch him sleep—face half-lit by passing streetlamps, features unguarded. I'd study the rise and fall of his chest, the ink on his arms and neck, the faint scars here and there, and wonder how someone so beautiful, so gentle in the dark, could transform into the monster of myth he became on stage.

He'd wake sometimes, catch me staring, and smile. "Can't sleep?" "Don't want to," I'd whisper. And he'd pull me close, the rumble of the road beneath us, the scent of whisky, leather, and smoke in the air.

We lived like that, off and on, for a year—suspended between worlds, between his music and my silence, between the woman I'd been and the one I was still becoming.

There were other women. I knew that. I knew it couldn't last.

But we lived in the fantasy for as long as we could, until the road ran out. And what remained was the memory of something rare and genuine—something passionate, something that felt very close to love.

Chapter Seventy-One

In time, the road grew quiet, and I did too. After the long fever of a life spent wandering, I found myself pulled back toward Tampa—the place I'd once fled, the place that had made me. I came not as a daughter, not as a ghost, but as a woman who'd finally made peace with her history.

The city had changed. It was growing into something elegant, even cosmopolitan. I began visiting my sister again. Our conversations were gentle, tentative, like testing the surface of old water. We didn't try to fix what time had undone; we just allowed it to be, talking about small things and old times.

There was distance, yes, but comfort too—a quiet understanding that love need not be loud to be true.

It was during those months that I met the man who would become my husband—a man nothing like the ones who had come before. He wasn't gilded or godlike, didn't wear the armor of money or myth. He was handsome, fit, and sexy—a blue-collar working man, honest, dependable, and decent in a way that felt almost old-fashioned.

We met by chance, and then not by chance at all. I asked to make him dinner. He said yes.

He was dazzled by me, I could tell—but cautious too. My edges were sharp, my silences deep. I lived in extremes he'd never known and could never understand. But in his presence, I softened.

He offered me something I knew I needed, though I resisted it at first—unsure if a reprieve could be sustained with someone so gentle.

I traveled between Savannah and Tampa for a while, holding on to both worlds—one born of quiet grace, the other of something resembling home. But distance has a way of stirring old ghosts, and David had always been haunted by what he couldn't control.

He didn't want me in Tampa. He said it was beneath me. What he meant was that it was beyond him.

When he realized I was seeing someone—really seeing someone—his tone changed. His voice hardened. He reminded me of the house in Savannah, of how it had been purchased through an LLC he controlled. I owned it, yes, but he could make it difficult. He could drag me through court, tie up the deed, exhaust me with the very thing I'd spent a lifetime escaping: his power.

He didn't have to raise his voice. The threat was enough. And I understood, then, that the house wasn't a home anymore. It was a leash.

So, I let it go.

I packed my things, left the keys on the marble counter, and walked out the same door I'd once entered with gratitude. I didn't look back.

David called a few times after that. I didn't answer. Eventually, the calls stopped. Or maybe I just stopped noticing.

Months passed. I kept to myself, split between love and quiet work, finding peace in anonymity. The noise of my former life receded—a tide going out for good. Although my boyfriend offered financial support, I was reluctant to take it. David had cut off all assistance, so I returned to escorting temporarily to make ends meet while I figured out my next move.

And then, one night, an offer came through the agency—a client requesting someone with my look, my presence, my discretion. The money was good. I took the job.

The drive to Charleston was long and quiet. The low country slid by in muted colors—silver marsh, black water, the faint shimmer of heat rising from the road. I thought about him—about the warmth in his eyes, how safe I felt when I was with him, how he worried for me and wished I'd stop.

When I arrived at the hotel, the elevator opened onto a floor of silence and soft light. I knocked once, twice. The door swung open.

It was David.

For a moment, the world stilled. There he was—unchanged in the ways that mattered. The same eyes that had once studied me like property, the same mouth that could shape a command into a compliment.

He didn't speak. Neither did I. Everything that needed saying lived in the air between us.

I met his gaze, steady and sure, then turned and walked away.

It was the last call I would ever do. And I didn't do it. Finally, that part of my life was over for good.

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Later that year, my memoir was published. It was my story, for better or worse—unvarnished, unfiltered, and entirely my own. The road to print had been fraught with frustration; editorial clashes and production missteps left me unable to shape the final version with the care and precision it deserved. Yet despite those compromises, I was proud of what I had done. I had told the truth as I knew it, laid claim to my own narrative. And in doing so, I found a quiet peace—knowing that my past no longer belonged to rumor or speculation, but to me, in my own words.

Despite its subject matter and staccato style, the book was favorably reviewed by The Tampa Bay Times. By then, I was something of a hometown legend. Shock jock Bubba the Love Sponge talked about me on the radio, rolling the headline off his tongue like a punchline: "The Wild Life of a Transsexual Goddess." But while the city buzzed, I was already dissolving my website and quietly turning the page—ready to live a life no longer measured in coverage.

In the years that followed, as it slipped out of print, individual copies began fetching as much as $300 on eBay and Amazon. Over time, it came to be regarded as something of a cult classic, which pleases me. After all, cult legends endure where blockbusters fade—not consumed but cherished, bound by recognition rather than reach, by those who see themselves in the story.

Chapter Seventy-Two

Eventually, my world grew quieter, but I welcomed it with the weariness of a soldier returning from war. No clients. No fanfare. No city lights waiting for my return. Just mornings that began with sunlight and coffee, and nights that ended in the quiet steadiness of love.

He and I built a beautiful life made of simple things—shared meals, long drives, days on the beach, and cocktails by the pool. There was laughter, of course, and tenderness, but also the kind of silence only two people who trust each other can share.

We didn't speak much of the past. It wasn't necessary. But one afternoon, well into our life together, a story surfaced in conversation, and he realized the Charlie I had spoken of was his childhood friend—someone he knew well and remembered fondly.

For a moment, neither of us spoke, something unseen but certain passing between us. We sat there, hand in hand, letting the weight of it settle. It felt like a thread drawn across time, tying together two parts of my story that had never met—until now. Like something spiritual had guided us both here, carrying the memory of that boy I'd once loved into the man who now held my heart.

Years turned gently after that. We stayed close to home and to each other, moving through the ups and downs of love and family life, but always measured by his patience, his laughter, his grace, his unwavering care.

On our twelfth anniversary, he took me to Savannah—back to the city I loved so much. We spent the afternoon wandering along the river, and later drove out to Bonaventure Cemetery—after all my travels, still my favorite place in all the world.

Among the moss and marble, beneath a sky bruised with the beginning of twilight, he took a knee. His voice was steady. His eyes shone. "Will you marry me?"

I said yes.

There, in that place I'd always loved, surrounded by beauty and ghosts, I promised myself to the living.

That evening, as we walked through the streets of Savannah, I thought of all we'd been through—the trials, the tenderness, the work it took to stay. Loving me hadn't always been easy. It came with its challenges, its shadows. But he never turned away.

When we reached the square, I paused beneath a canopy of light, closed my eyes, and said a quiet prayer—the way I used to when I was a child. Only this time, I didn't pray for peace or love. I gave thanks to God—because, at long last, they had come.

Epilogue

In time, I found a new way to speak. Not through performance, or seduction, or survival—but through the lens.

Photography became my second act. It was never a plan, only a calling—something that arrived softly, like dawn, as if it had been waiting for me all along. I began to see the world again, frame by frame. The way light bent against skin. The hush of a shadow. The truth inside a face.

What began as instinctual talent became a dedicated craft. One image became two, then a series, then a body of work—portraits of beauty and ruin, youth and grace, the ordinary transfigured.

Years passed, and word spread. Eventually, a serious downtown gallery invited me to show my work. I said yes, quietly, not expecting much. A few friends, I thought. A modest crowd. But when the night arrived, the city seemed to gather at the door.

They came. All of them.

Countless faces—nearly every face from the chapters of my life—older, but still beautiful, radiant, unbroken. They moved through the gallery like constellations returning to orbit, their laughter soft, their presence electric. They honored me, congratulated me, genuinely happy to see me doing so well. My husband circulated nearby, always within reach, his presence a quiet constant amid the noise and nostalgia. He didn't need to say much; his hand at the small of my back said enough—that I was seen, supported, home.

Later that night, I stood in the wings with the gallery staff, watching everyone drift from frame to frame, pausing to study the images, the fragments of a life remade in light.

The curator turned to me, eyes wide, voice hushed with awe. "I don't think I've ever seen so many beautiful people gathered together in one space."

I smiled. She didn't know—couldn't know—that beauty had always been my language, my lineage. That these were the souls who had shaped me, mirrored me, carried me through the storms of my becoming.

And now, here we were—still standing. Still shining. Stars from a lost world reunited again for one perfect night. A life, at last, made whole.

Afterword

Every now and then, I run into someone I used to know. The wonderful thing about true friendships is that when a connection is real, time can't erode it. The years may pass, lives may diverge, but the bond remains—familiar, warm, unchanged at its core.

Since I'm not on social media, people often wonder: Is she okay? Is she happy? Is she still beautiful?

Yes, I'm okay. Yes, I'm happy. But more than that, I've learned that gratitude for what *is* matters just as much as the pursuit of what you imagine happiness to be. Peace, I've discovered, isn't something you chase. It's something you recognize—often in hindsight—and hold close when it finally arrives.

As of this writing, I've been with my husband for nearly two decades. We're both older now, and love has carried with it countless beautiful moments—and its fair share of challenges. But when I look at him sleeping quietly nearby, or spend a day swimming in the Gulf with him, laughing and being silly, I know he is my person. Nothing can change that. I thank God every day that the man who found me was one of courage, understanding, and deep moral excellence—a rare and steady soul in a world that so often rewards the opposite.

As for beauty—yes, I still turn heads when I walk into a room, and I'm grateful for it. I take care of myself, not just out of vanity (wink), but reverence. Yoga, long walks beneath the Florida sun, a mindful diet, exercise, and the occasional treatment or procedure—all part of the quiet ritual of self-preservation. After everything my body has carried me through, tending to it now feels like both gratitude and grace.

And maybe that's what time offers us most—a chance to step outside the noise and see our lives clearly. To understand what truly matters, what endures, and what it means to live authentically. That clarity has allowed me to look back not just on my own path, but on the world that shaped it—and the one we inhabit now.

When I was coming up, there weren't many of us—at least not in the open. The word transgender wasn't in common use yet, and safety often meant silence. But I was never built for the shadows. Living as myself meant stepping into rooms that weren't always ready for me, facing danger and doubt with as much fearlessness as I could gather. Every night I survived, every morning I woke up still standing, felt like its own quiet revolution.

For me, being me always mattered more than being labeled or explained. I didn't need my womanhood affirmed by others to know who I was. What I wanted was a life that felt whole, honest, and free.

I also recognize the privilege I carried—how my appearance allowed me, at times, to move unseen, to "pass," as we used to say. Not everyone has that option. Many of my sisters and siblings face a harsher gaze, one that can turn dangerous in an instant. Their courage humbles me still.

It saddens me that, after all the progress we fought for, the world feels uncertain again. In so many places, trans people are being thrust back into the crosshairs of politics and fear. We've come so far—yet some days it feels as though the ground beneath us is shifting, and the simple act of living openly has once more become an act of defiance.

When my memoir was first released, I was surprised—and, if I'm honest, a little disappointed—that some within the trans community found it difficult to connect with. Many expected a more explicit accounting of my transition—the surgeries, the hormones, the physical transformations. But for me, those details were never the story. They were private milestones along a much larger journey. My womanhood was never contingent upon disclosure. I wasn't trying to document how I became myself, but rather who I became, and what it meant to live freely in that truth.

I understand now that visibility carries expectations, that people look for mirrors of their own experience. But I can't be held up as anyone's idea of trans femininity if I only ever saw myself simply—as I am. My life has always been less about explanation and more about existence, about the daily act of being.

My hope for every young trans person—and for anyone still struggling to be seen or to live freely—is that they're able to do so with dignity and respect. Showing up as you are must be enough. You don't owe the world an explanation, only your truth.

If you can live that truth—unapologetically, yet with grace—I believe life will meet you where you are. It will send you the people meant to walk

beside you, to love you, to carry you through the lonely seasons this rare, challenging, and beautiful existence can sometimes bring.

I look back now with immense gratitude—for the friends who became family, for the strangers who offered kindness, for the love that met me in unexpected places. I have lived many lives, and I have told the truth of them as best I could. If these pages have shown anything, I hope it's that beauty and resilience are not opposites, but reflections—that survival can be art, and that freedom, fully lived, is the most exquisite form of courage.

Author's Note

CELESTE AND ROBERTO

Celeste and Roberto were a blessing in my young life. Time has a way of scattering family and friends, but nothing could diminish the joy and safety they gave me when I needed it most. They were irreverent, warm, protective, and full of fun—the kind of people who shape your childhood without ever realizing it. The last time I saw them, that deeply human connection was still there, unchanged by time.

ESME

Esme burned brightly for far longer than the world expected. Her beauty evolved, sharpened, softened again. She lived exactly as she wanted to—on her own terms and by her own rules. The last time I saw her, she was on stage, older, yes, but a showgirl till the end.

FRANK

Frank's story closed suddenly, in a way both cruel and strangely fitting for a man who lived at the intersection of creation and consequence. After years of silence between us, we had arranged to meet again at a fashion show. Minutes before I arrived, he collapsed backstage from a heart attack. I never saw him. His death marked the end of a complicated love—one built from art, ambition, and the strange devotion that can bloom between a muse and her maker.

H

H remains my truest companion in this life—my mirror, my brother in spirit. Our bond has never belonged to any single category; it is not friendship, not romance, not family as the world defines it, but something older and soul-deep. Through every season of our lives, we have remained

side by side, unchanged in our devotion. Some connections are fated. Some loves are meant to last. Ours is both.

RICKY

Ricky endured more than most men are asked to, yet he never let hardship take the sweetness from him. He carried on, strong and steady, a survivor in every sense. He remains one of the rare souls whose kindness stayed uncorrupted by circumstance.

LIZA

Liza's halcyon ways never faded with time. She has always been a woman of appetite, of danger, of charm—a force. Some lives are meant to be meteors. We vanished from each other's worlds gradually, out of respect and self-preservation. Not all closeness is meant to last forever; sometimes the truest kindness is distance.

SHEENA

Sheena drifted away from the nightlife and into a quieter world—domestic bliss, motherhood, a life built of gentler things. Like many old friends, we moved in and out of each other's orbits over the years. But when she arrived at my gallery show long after our heyday, she still parted the crowd. Still luminous. Still the most beautiful human being I have ever seen standing in front of me. Still.

KEITH

Keith, my first love. He is now a father and a husband, and I will always wish him well.

ANDREW

After I retired from the internet, Andrew and I parted ways. Our partnership dissolved, and we lost contact. He was a formative presence in my life, steady in ways I needed at the time, and he gave far more than he ever took. Our paths diverged, but I carry gratitude for the chapter we shared.

TISH

Tish fought her way through years of illness and physical struggle, but her spirit was never diminished. She lived with the same audacity and magnetism that defined her in our youth—the incredible, ballsy, beautiful

stripper who could command any room she walked into. She made it to my gallery show a year before she died of cancer, and even then she was radiant. Still fierce. Still herself. That is the version I hold close.

DAVID

David took care of me for years, and I cannot diminish the privilege I experienced because of his generosity. He taught me more than he ever realized, and he toughened me in ways I didn't always appreciate at the time. My feelings about him remain conflicted; he was both villain and hero at different stages of my life. After years of the good life, he succumbed to dementia and eventually passed. When he died, his sister reached out to me. After all the years I had vanished from his world, it stunned me that he still knew where to find me—that he had left a message behind so I could be reached. I whispered a prayer for him then. Only in that moment did I see beyond the ruin and the hunger, into the small, wordless hope he had carried for us all along—a hope he never learned how to offer, and I never learned how to receive.

BO

Bo stopped making films and disappeared from the world we once shared. After years of silence, I ran into him at a party in Orange County shortly before I retired from touring and internet work. He was happy to see me, but he left quickly. His beauty had begun to fade, undone by years of hard living. He was no longer the most beautiful man in the room, and I could see how much that truth wounded him. But as I watched him walk away, I still saw the man I had known—the one framed in my memory like a perfect shot from another life. In that image, he remained untouched. There was no one in that room, or any room, more beautiful than the man I remembered. I never saw him again.

JASON, SEBASTIAN & MY SOUTH BEACH BOYS

Jason drifted out of my life long ago, lost to time and distance, but he remains a giant in the memories of my early years—beautiful, kind, and larger than life in all the ways that mattered. My heart hopes he is safe and happy, wherever he landed. Sebastian became a successful accessories designer in New York City and is still, to this day, devastatingly handsome. We haven't seen each other in years, but we kept in touch here and there, and he is well. Ricardo Forté went on to have a celebrated career in Argentina

after our wild South Beach days—an international playboy and a television personality of real renown. He died in Buenos Aires in 2013. As for the others... my tribe of lost boys is scattered now, blown across continents and years. I don't know where they ended up or who they became. But in my memory, they remain young, daring, sun-lit, and unstoppable.

PASQUALE

Pasquale and I never saw each other face to face again after Greece, but we kept in touch for several years. He was a mentor and an artist in the truest sense—sharp-eyed, generous, uncompromising in his devotion to beauty. His letters were always brief but filled with insight, the kind of guidance that reveals itself slowly over time. He died after a long battle with AIDS in Paris in the early 2000s. I still think of him when I am working, when I am creating, when I am listening for the quiet voice that tells me what comes next.

CHARLIE

Charlie's story is harder for me to tell. Even now, after all these years, speaking his name stirs something tender and raw in me. When I first wrote Goddess, I couldn't fully find the words to express the grief I felt—nothing I wrote could touch the depth of it. Something in me died the day he passed, and although I learned to love again, I've never been able to release or resuscitate the part of myself that belonged to him. Every now and again, he comes to me in dreams. It's always too fleeting, but just to see his face again—even for a moment—feels like a broken part of me is whole again.

JILLIAN

Jillian—Charlie's mother—took a strange and painful turn in my life. After all I had done for her son, she turned on me in an effort to save herself from financial ruin. She made the mistake of believing that a man who took care of me could somehow rescue her too. It pains me to say this, and I'm sure it would pain Charlie as well, but I've learned that almost anyone can disappoint you. And she did.

JIM

Jim came into my life at a moment when I didn't believe I could feel anything soft or safe again. He never tried to replace what I had lost, and he never asked me to be anything other than who I was. Instead, he offered comfort without expectation, presence without pressure. I don't know anything about his life today, but I imagine he is still the man he always was. Men that good... they never change.

MY FATHER

My father spent his last days outside the walls that had held him for so long. Even then, he carried a kind of spell—beauty sharpened by danger, charisma edged in sorrow. When we finally had the chance to reach for one another, I found myself unable to step fully into that moment. It is a regret that still hums under my ribs. Yet there are days when I catch my reflection and see him there—in the angle of a cheekbone, the cut of a shadow—his wild, ruinous beauty flickering through me like an inheritance I never asked for but quietly treasure.

MY MOTHER

And my mother... she softened before she left this world. The distance between us dissolved in those final years, replaced by gentleness, clarity, and an understanding that came too late to save the past, but just in time to redeem the future.

MY SISTER

My sister is a mother and a grandmother now, and a woman who works hard to be the best version of herself. We are bound by the past. It is both a blessing and a curse.

MY HUSBAND

And my husband... he is the quiet miracle of my later life. A man who met me not as myth or memory, but as I am—shaped, scarred, softened, alive. With him, there is no performance, no past to outrun, no part of myself I have to tuck away. He is steadiness, devotion, a harbor I never imagined I would have. Loving him taught me that the heart can rebuild itself, and that home is sometimes a person, not a place.

CLOSING

As for me, I learned that survival is not the end of the story. It is the beginning of the life you build afterward—quiet, chosen, and fully your own. These people shaped me, loved me, wounded me, and held up mirrors I wasn't always ready to face. I offer their stories with respect for who they were then, and with gratitude for all they helped me become.

Appendix A

Digital Edition Metadata & Archival Notes

1. Digital Edition Metadata (For Archivists, Researchers & Catalogers)

Title: Goddess: 20th Anniversary Digital Restoration Edition.

Author: Raquel Reyes.

Imprint: Signal Found Productions.

Digital Publication Year: 2025.

Original Publication Year: Excerpts of the work originally circulated in 2005 via the author's personal website and early internet message boards. (Full Print) 2007 (BookSurge/OOP).

Canonical Domains:
thetsgoddess.com (author's official domain of record).

Digitally Restored by:
signalfoundproductions.com.
transwikiproject.com.

Edited by:
Elizabeth Garner.

ISBN (Digital Edition): 979-8-218-82639-0.

Edition Notes:

Author-sanctioned 20-year restored edition includes new front matter: Introduction, archival framing notes, etc.

Original 2005–2007 text revised for clarity, continuity, and historical accuracy.

Errata from the 2007 BookSurge version corrected.

Supplemental materials removed from original scans for integrity.

File Format: EPUB (primary), PDF (archival), MOBI (legacy support).

Digital Asset Integrity: Version 1.0 (2025). SHA-256 hash available upon request for verification.

Appendix B

Archival Rationale & Editorial Notes

Purpose of the Digital Restoration and Publication

This edition exists to:

Correct editorial errors from the long-out-of-print 2007 version and expand on areas of particular interest to readers, including the author's post-internet visibility status.

Provide a stable, accurate edition for scholars, journalists, and archivists to contextualize the author's early digital presence within 1990s–2000s internet culture and reframe the memoir through its historical significance rather than myth or rumor.

Archival Positioning: This edition should be understood as:

A cultural document and a record of early trans digital visibility.

A primary-source narrative from pre-social media internet culture.

This is not a commercial reissue, but a preservation effort.

Editorial Philosophy:

No "modernizing" of the author's original voice.

No political retrofitting.

All revisions aim at clarity, continuity, and historical record keeping.

The memoir remains a time capsule and should be approached as such.

Any literary changes or additions to the original document were personally written by Raquel Reyes, the author.

Appendix C

Notes for Future Researchers & Digital Historians

1. Internet History Context:
Author was one of the first widely downloaded trans models of the early web, a pre–social media era where visibility depended on web rings, forums, FTP mirrors, and fan sites. Early audience reception was shaped by anonymous online culture, not influencer logic.

2. Media Misattribution:
Multiple copies of the 2007 print edition circulated without author control. Scans and unauthorized PDFs introduced formatting errors, missing pages, and misinformation. This edition corrects and supersedes those versions.

3. Author's Digital Return (2025):
Triggered by renewed academic and cultural interest in early trans internet figures. The author's participation is voluntary and contextual, not promotional. Digital presence is framed as archival stewardship, not a typical book relaunch.

4. Access & Preservation:
Archivists are encouraged to cite the 2025 Digital Restoration Edition as the authoritative text. Disregard unverified scans stored on aging forums, torrents, or EDM-sharing sites. Use canonical domains for sourcing and confirmation.

Appendix D

Suggested Citation Format

MLA:

Reyes, Raquel. Goddess: 20th Anniversary Digital Restoration Edition. Signal Found Productions, 2025. Trans Wiki Project, 2025.

Chicago:

Reyes, Raquel. Goddess: 20th Anniversary Digital Restoration Edition. 2025.

APA:

Reyes, R. (2025). Goddess: 20th Anniversary Digital Restoration Edition. Signal Found Productions. Trans Wiki Project.

Appendix E

Errata & Revision Summary

Major Corrections (2025 Edition):

Removed artifacts from 2007 BookSurge printing.
Corrected punctuation, spacing, and formatting inconsistencies.
Restored narrative continuity in chapters.
Updated chapter sequence and front-matter structure.
Photographic cover changed and updated.
All references to outdated digital platforms annotated or preserved as period-specific.

Additions:

New Introduction from Editor.
New Foreword from Author.
Streamlined timeline of events.
Expanded familial and personal relationships throughout various chapters, allowing for greater context and, in some areas, alluding to the present-day continuum.

New Afterword from Author.

Updated verso page with correct imprint, ISBN, and canonical URLs.

About The Author

Raquel Reyes rose to prominence on the early internet, preceding the world of influencers and algorithmic visibility. Documented in early media as "the world's most downloaded transsexual model," she transformed her small corner of the web into a pioneering blueprint for digital self-creation. At the height of her fame, Reyes became a central figure in conversations about body politics, sexuality, and media representation.

Photographed, written about, and debated across online forums, radio programs, and mainstream publications, she complicated prevailing notions of desirability, stigma, and power, helping shape early frameworks for understanding trans beauty and identity, as well as the evolving aesthetics of self-presentation in the digital age.

In 2005, she published Goddess, a memoir that evolved into a cult classic—shared, studied, and sought after long after it fell out of print. For two decades it remained an underground landmark in the history of trans storytelling and early internet culture. This 20th Anniversary Digital Restoration Edition restores the text to the public with the clarity and context it has always deserved.

Reyes's career on the early internet ended with her retirement in 2006. She is married. After a successful career in the photographic arts, she now works as an executive in the publishing industry.

At the turn of the new millennium, Raquel Reyes erupted onto the early internet and became one of its first true viral superstars—long before social media gave the world its influencers. By the time she vanished from digital life, she had become a legend within the American erotic demimonde: an enigma who eclipsed the very ideals of womanhood the culture claimed she could never embody.

But Goddess is not the story of the myth that followed her.
It is the story of the woman behind it.

With fierce, unsparing clarity, Reyes revisits her rise, her ruin, and her reinvention—tracing a life shaped by survival, desire, and perpetual motion. From her beginnings in Tampa to the clandestine brothels of Boston and New York; from the glittering mansions of Miami Beach and Los Angeles—where she partied with actors, rock stars, and porn queens—to drug-fueled odysseys across Europe and South America, her life unfolds in scenes of decadence, danger, and breathtaking chaos.

Now reintroduced in this 20th Anniversary Digital Restoration Edition, Goddess remains a landmark work of trans literature and a rare primary record of early internet fame—capturing not only transition and erotic labor, but also a fierce refusal to be contained by the narrow, clinical frameworks of its time—unfiltered, unrepentant, and utterly human.

Goddess is more than a memoir. It is a cultural record—and it remains as urgent now, perhaps even more contemporary, than when it was first written.

SIGNAL
FOUND